TWO APACHES OF PARIS

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BY
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"The Shulamite," "The Rod of Justice,"
Etc.

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INTRODUCTION

As New York has its gangsters, and London its Hooligans, so Paris has more or less organized bands of street ruffians of the lowest type, who, within the last decade, have come to be known as "Apaches." Bestowed at first by some Parisian newspaper men, who had in mind the cruelest and most dangerous tribe of American Indians, the appellation has been accepted by the Paris Apaches themselves, not as a stigma, but as a name worn with no little pride.

And they do not belie it. The tough class of no other city goes to such lengths of wanton cruelty, of absolutely reckless indifference to law or morality, or of murder done seemingly oftentimes for the sheer sake of doing it.

Affiliated in bands or gangs, like those of New York City, each with its colors and "signs," and each under the domination of some man more daring or "quick on the draw" than his fellows, they terrorize a large portion of the French metropolis. Certain quarters, even in broad daylight, seem to be entirely at their mercy: the police of the city being apparently powerless to break them up.

Unlike their New York *confrères,* their weapon is not the revolver, but the knife, a far more silent weapon, which they can also throw, javelin-like, with deadly accuracy. Unlike the New York gangsters, they make no attempt to mix in politics. They are a

class by themselves, with their own laws, tribunals and customs—even their own language, for their argot is almost unintelligible to the native Frenchman.

Their work and sustenance? Chiefly highway robbery of the crudest type. Many a victim is played into their hands by their women. Others are simply street hold-ups, a handkerchief *garrote* peculiar to the ilk taking the place of the American sandbag. If necessary, the victim is tortured until senseless, without the slightest qualm; or, if advisable, knifed, and left, or tossed into the Seine with little ceremony.

A further word should be said of the Apache women. Mostly of the courtesan class, the men act toward them the part of the American *cadet.* And while the men Apaches are brutal degenerates, the women are often prepossessing, equally cold-blooded, it is true, but of far higher intelligence. Their very intelligence makes them, if anything, more dangerous. They are the spiders who lure the intended victims into the Apache web. On the street one easily recognizes them—hatless, bold, self-possessed.

The haunts of the whole tribe are the cheaper *cabarets,* the cafés near the markets, and in the older *faubourgs.* In the questionable dance and concert halls they may be seen at all hours of the night, taking their pleasure as crudely as their drinks and their "business."

To root them out is no small problem. However much they quarrel among themselves, they are banded together implacably and avowedly against society in general. The *gendarme* who arrests one of them, the judge who convicts one, are marked men; and the arm of the Apache is as long and patient as that of the Italian Camorra.

THE PUBLISHER.

Two Apaches of Paris

CHAPTER I

Robin Clithero leaned back in his chair and laughed heartily. His laugh was loud and resonant and it rang true.

"What a chap you are, Owen," he gasped, when he had somewhat recovered his breath; "the deuce only knows what you'll think of next!"

It was an occasion for merriment, and Robin's laugh was by no means singular. The famous dancing-hall of the Moulin de la Bonne Fortune, at Montmartre, was thronged by a fantastically garbed crowd given over to the wild license of a carnival ball. It was the night of Shrove Tuesday, when extravagance and folly held undisputed sway.

The Saturnalian revel was at its height. Dancing was only indulged in in a desultory fashion—a "go-as-you-please" entertainment—save when space was cleared for professional performers; the floor was carpeted with many-hued confetti, and the air was dust-laden and heavy; the countless electric lights glowed red and yellow through a mist of tobacco smoke and the steam of perspiring humanity. The band brayed intermittently, heedless of the accompaniment of toy trumpets, whistles, and cat-calls—the thousand and one

noises in which such a crowd delights; everyone did just as he or she liked, and it was all breathless, spontaneous, and irresponsible.

From the box where Owen Mayne was entertaining his Bohemian friends—fellow artists, models, anyone, in short, who cared to claim his acquaintance—one looked down upon a kaleidoscope of color—a seething, swirling, palpitating mass of life, painted in lurid hues that fascinated by their very discordance.

The crowd had been particularly dense below the box a few minutes ago. It was due to a happy inspiration on the part of Owen Mayne. By means of a rod and string he had suspended object after object dear to the feminine heart—flowers, perfume in bottles, light articles of attire—over the heads of the masqueraders, swinging them irritatingly before women's faces and then jerking them out of reach as soon as eager hands were stretched out to grasp them.

It was great fun, attended by much springing in the air, queer contortions, the elbowing and pushing of one another, giggling, and general hubbub. The male lookers-on cheered and encouraged the competitors to fresh exertions; one big fellow had lifted a slim Pierrette upon his shoulders, making occasional dashes forward with his charge, while another held his girl—a pink-cheeked and flaxen-haired doll—by the arms and jumped her up and down in the quaintest fashion whenever the swinging object came within her reach. Now and then a general rush would be made, a rush that invariably ended in a scuffle upon the floor.

The contest had reached its height over a pair of gaudily buckled garters. It was the final disposition of these which had aroused Robin's mirth. At the same time Owen, wearied of the game, rose and bowed gracefully to the clamouring crowd, and then retired

to the back of the box, taking Robin with him; their places in the front were immediately occupied by a couple of showily dressed girls, one, tall and handsome. known as "La Grande Rose," the other, fragile and pretty, as "P'tit Bleu"; they were both models, and of course had their attendant swains.

"Now we can have a chat, Rob," said Owen, after he had given an order for refreshment. "I'm glad you caught sight of me and came up. We never seem to meet now that you've elected to bury yourself at Fontainebleau. Such a mad thing to do—at this time of year."

"It's cheap living," responded the other readily, "and away from temptations. And, then, I love the forest, know every inch of it, and like to paint it in all its moods. Besides, there's another reason why I should love Fontainebleau." He gave a queer little jerk of his head, then added quickly, "But that's ancient history. Anyway, the country is good enough for a plodder; Paris is for geniuses like yourself, Owen, soaring rockets."

Robin Clithero, big, honest, and stolid, nondescript of colouring and homely of face, gazed with a certain envy at his better favoured friend. Owen Mayne was certainly very good-looking, even if it was after a rather flashy manner. He was tall and slim and dark, and had a "hail-fellow-well-met" way about him that was quite delightful and earned him considerable popularity—especially with women. The red "Mephistopheles" costume he wore suited him admirably.

Yet they were great friends these two, though undoubtedly the devotion was more on the side of Robin. It was in his nature to bestow a certain dog-like fidelity upon anyone who had captured his affection. Besides, he considered that he owed a debt to Owen Mayne, who

upon the occasion of their first meeting had saved his life under somewhat exciting circumstances, and Robin never forgot a debt—it was another of his peculiarly unbohemian characteristics.

"If I soar like a rocket," laughed Owen, "I'm just as likely to come down like a stick. You know the sort of chap I am, Rob. I can't put my shoulder to the wheel—never could. Look at my picture, 'The Chamois Hunter,' well, I haven't touched it since I saw you last."

"But why not?" protested the other. "I tell you, Owen, that that picture would make your name and fortune. I always said so. A fine piece of work, full of symbolism."

"You know why I chucked it up," responded Owen, a touch of impatience in his tone. "La Place Pigalle couldn't provide me with the style of face I wanted for my siren—nor the whole of Paris, for the matter of that. I suppose it doesn't exist except somewhere at the back of my brain, whence it peeps out mockingly in my dreams—but it's so infernally elusive, and I'm hanged if I can ever put anything on canvas that resembles it to the smallest extent. So what's the use of trying?"

"But why not do with a substitute—why just that particular face?" urged Robin. "There are lots of pretty girls——"

"Pretty girls!" exclaimed Owen scornfully. "It's not a pretty girl that I want. There's P'tit Bleu who sobs her blue eyes out because I won't let her sit. But do you think my siren is to be the style of a mere *brasserie* wench? No, old man, my siren must be a tigress, a panther, with a woman's face and form. She must have the beauty of consummate vice. She must horrify—but allure. Her hair must be a net in which

all the sins of the world are caught and held. Her eyes must burn you with their passion. They must be like mirrors in which you see reflected the most secret desires of your heart. Her mouth must be an opium-soaked poppy, the kisses of which are delirious phantasms, oblivion, and death. And her body—ah, her body—a snake-woman, subtle, lithe and enveloping, with a grip that only relaxes when your very spirit has been absorbed. That's my siren, Rob. Is it any wonder I haven't found her? But I tell you if I ever did I'd give myself to her—yes, body and soul."

"Thank God you haven't!" retorted the more simple-minded Robin. "And for your own sake, old fellow, I hope you never will. Give me P'tit Bleu any day in preference to your monster. Hullo!" he added quickly, stepping to the front of the box from which the girls and their companions had by now retired. "What are they up to? A special dance, eh?"

A space had been cleared in the centre of the great saloon. Fantastically attired couples were taking up their positions in sets of eight. There was to be a "quadrille" danced by professionals. Robin recognised familiar faces, and cried out their names to the girls at the back of the box.

"There's Zouzou l'Epatante over there," he exclaimed. "She's with Manon la Cigale. And here's Toupet Gris in the set close to us, so we shall see something in the way of high kicking."

They all leaned over the ledge of the box. The band played the introductory bars of a favourite dance. Robin waved his hand to Toupet Gris, who executed a fantastic *pas-seul* in response, ending up with an exaggerated curtsey.

"Who's the girl facing us—the one dancing with that

ugly chap who looks like an Apache?" queried someone as the quadrille began.

Owen Mayne and Robin turned their eyes in the direction indicated. They saw a thin, lithe, and black-clad figure bent almost double over the arm of a forbidding-looking youth, who seemed to have aped no disguise, but come to the ball in the costume that was natural to him, the blouse and red scarf, the tight trousers, the peaked cap of the loafer of the outer boulevards—the so-called Apache.

The next moment the girl was standing erect, smiling, and displaying teeth that were dazzingly white, small, and sharp, and which served to enhance the vivid crimson of her lips. Her glorious black hair hung loose over her shoulders. It was a small face and, save at the lips, almost devoid of colour.

Robin glanced apprehensively at Owen. "She looks a devil," he muttered; "a devil. Do you know her, Rose?"

Rose, a heavily built, dark girl, leant her arm familiarly upon the man's shoulder and followed the direction of his eyes. Then, with a sharp exclamation, and disregarding Robin, she turned to the other girl, P'tit Bleu, whose attention just then was wholly taken up by a flirtation in the incipient stage.

"*Regards-moi ça!* Zélie, of all people in the world, Zélie la Couleuvre! Who'd have thought she'd have the cheek to show herself here? *Qu'en dis-tu,* Poulette?" Rose had slipped her arm round the waist of P'tit Bleu, dragging her ruthlessly to the front. The two girls were devoted friends and inseparable companions.

P'tit Bleu uttered bird-like chirps of wonder. She had a round, precocious face and an impertinent, tip-tilted nose. Her speech was twittering and she af-

fected little jerky movements of the head, like a sparrow. Her costume represented a blue bird, which was quite appropriate.

"Nothing like advertisement, my dear. I, too, I will one day be mixed up in a murder trial, and then—who knows?—all Paris may want to paint my picture."

Robin flicked with his finger the bare, comely arm that still rested on his shoulder, recalling himself thus to attention.

"I asked you a question, Rose. Who is this Zélie?"

"Do you mean to say you don't know?" The two girls chorused their surprise. Then Rose volunteered the required information. She spoke in jerky, disconnected sentences.

"Six months ago, wasn't it? Half a dozen *vauriens* —rascals from the *fortifs*—Apaches—they fought together—it was a fierce and bloody struggle—they were all wounded and carried to hospital—two died—and what did they fight for, you ask?" The girl jerked her elbow in the direction of the dark-clad, swaying figure below. "It was for that creature—the Queen of the Apaches, as they called her. And they were none the better for shedding their blood—those who lived. Of course, she took up with another—while they went to prison. There he is—her *type.* An Apache of the Apaches. They dance together at the Florian. For naturally Zélie became notorious—one only has to get one's name in the papers for all the world to want to see you. And there she is, the *coquine,* parading herself here instead of hiding in the gutter where she belongs." Rose spoke with righteous indignation.

"But, *sapristi,* she can dance!" The speaker was Jean Brieul, the young man to whom P'tit Bleu was devoting herself.

Owen had not been listening. He was sitting on the

other side of Robin, his elbows resting on the velvet-covered ledge of the box, his chin sunk in his hands. His eyes fixed upon Zélie.

Robin noticed this and tried to distract his friend's attention. "Look at Toupet! She's just kicked that chap's hat off." He laughed—a strained laugh.

Owen gripped him by the arm. "Robin," he whispered excitedly. "I've found her! Fate has sent her my way. That is my siren in the flesh. Look at her mouth—it's like a bleeding wound. Look at her eyes—*mon Dieu,* man, look at her eyes!"

He was trembling with suppressed excitement. The wild dance continued—fantastic, untrammelled, licentious—a riot of the baser instincts. And to Owen, watching, it seemed that Zélie was born of that dance, that in her own person all its evil was concentrated. It was thus that she had come to him—the woman, the siren, for whom he was ready to barter his soul.

The music ended on a wild, screeching note, and there followed a clapping of hands, a chorus of catcalls, discordant shouts and cries. *Serpentins* were flung this way and that. Owen seized the rod, which had already done service, and quickly attaching a red rose—torn, regardless of protest, from the corsage of one of the models—to the string, he flung it so that it hung suspended before the dancer.

For a moment she suspected a trick, and laughingly put her hands behind her back. Then, as Owen, standing up in the box, cried out to her, she returned his gaze, and her eyes still held him as she took the flower from its string, lifted it for a moment to her face, and then ostentatiously pressed it to her bosom.

Her companion of the forbidding countenance looked on and scowled.

CHAPTER II

"So you are an artist, and you wish me to sit for you. It would not be the first time that I sit—but now—I don't know."

Zélie shook her head dubiously. She was seated at a little table with Owen Mayne, and a perspiring waiter had just set before them two tall glasses with contained a green fluid.

They had spent the best part of an hour in each other's company, these two. Owen had simply carried her off from her surly cavalier, who had frowned, but said nothing, though Owen was quite aware all the time that he and his companion had been shadowed by an ill-omened figure, watched out of the corners of a pair of dull, grey eyes.

He was in nowise disconcerted. He was not the man to be afraid of an Apache or anything else.

Robin had croaked—but then it was Robin's way to croak. "I think she is hateful," he had urged, "the personification of all that is bad. For Heaven's sake, Owen, leave her to her *type*—as Rose says. They're well matched."

"I want a personification of all that is bad for my picture," Owen had retorted, and, after that, there was no more to be said.

"Why can't you sit for me now?" urged Owen.

The woman shrugged her narrow shoulders. "He won't let me. He would be furious. He is jealous—*mon Bibi.*"

"Bother Bibi," retorted the man. "Are you so fond of him, then, Zélie?" He addressed her with the second person of familiarity—was it not Carnival time?

The girl's brows narrowed and her eyes became slits that yet shot fire. "He has struck me—once—twice—many times. I bear the mark of his knife on my shoulder." She laughed fiercely. "And he has the print of my teeth on his wrist!" Her little, sharp teeth glowed white as she spoke.

"Why should you consider the fellow if that's the way he treats you?" Owen put the question half lazily, for he knew what the answer would be. He was studying the girl's face, gratifying his artistic soul.

"He would kill me—you, too, perhaps. Are you afraid?" She peered up into his face with a queer look in her green eyes. Perhaps she was summing him up.

Apparently Zélie's scrutiny was satisfactory to her. She dropped her eyes and sipped her absinthe. "Are you afraid?" she repeated.

"Not I," he replied easily. "And as for danger to yourself, Zélie, I'll see to that. *Sapristi,*" he added, leaning toward her so that his face was very close to the waving, glistening mass of hair where it fell upon her shoulders, "to think I have been looking for you all these months, and that you really exist! It's as if the devil had created you from the thoughts of my brain. Don't you know that you've got the devil's beauty?"

She smiled, well pleased. "Well, we are a pair," she said, alluding to his costume. Presently she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table, her slim fingers clasped together under her chin. "What is your name?" she asked.

"Owen Mayne."

Her lips tried to form the words. "O-en. No, but I cannot say it. I will just call you Phisto for short. Are you not Mephisto?"

"Call me what you like," he replied, winding a finger in a strand of her hair. It had a subtle perfume, her hair, that mounted to his brain and intoxicated him. "As long as you promise to come to my studio and sit for me," he added.

She put another question. "Are you rich?"

He laughed. "I've got a few *billets de mille* left," he said. "We'll spend them together, Zélie."

Once more she scrutinized him, and her eyes softened. "I like you," she declared. "You know what it is you want. You do not fight for it with a knife and in the dark like Bibi—but you fight. Listen, this I will promise. If I can I will come to you—you will tell me the address of your studio——"

"You must come, Zélie," he interrupted, gripping her wrist tightly. "You must. I want you."

"I will come—if I can escape from him—I swear it."

"To-morrow?"

"Perhaps. Yes, perhaps to-morrow. And now"—she drank off the absinthe at a gulp—"you must let me go. You must not speak to me again to-night. It would not be safe. Especially outside—you understand that? By no means outside."

She rose and stretched out her hand, flashing her white teeth at him. *"Au revoir, mon ami le diable."*

"A demain, Mme. la Couleuvre," he retorted. How the name suited her! A snake-woman! No doubt she had received the title because she was so lithe and slim of body—but, then, she could wound, too—he was sure of that.

She tossed her hair back from her shoulders, gath-

ered the folds of her black skirt together, and was soon lost in the crowd.

A little while later Owen met his fellow-artist Robin Clithero alone and a trifle bored. The two men left the ball together, driving through the mist and rain to Owen's studio for a final smoke.

Later still the Moulin de la Bonne Fortune disgorged its burden of humanity. The broad boulevard and the neighbouring narrow streets echoed with shouts and laughter as the motley crew slowly dispersed. It was the morning of Ash Wednesday.

Bibi Coupe-vide was in a bad temper, though Zélie hung on his arm and called him her *Bibi chéri* and other queer, endearing names peculiar to her class. His language in return was of an order only to be understood by those conversant with the lowest *argot*—which is a tongue of its own. He was a narrow-chested youth, with thin yellow hair fringed on his forehead; he had a receding chin and little deep-set eyes—a born hooligan—an Apache.

"Let there be no mistake about it," he said in low, guttural tones, clenching her arm to his side as in a vice, "you are mine, *ma gosse,* and if you give yourself to another for love woe betide you—and him."

Suddenly, with a quick movement, he threw back her sleeve, displaying her bare white skin to the elbow. With a lean finger he pointed to a mark upon it. "Don't you dare forget that," he muttered.

"I know," she replied sullenly, with an effort to readjust the sleeve and hide the blue tattoo mark. "Is it likely that I shall forget?"

"A Bibi pour la vie," he quoted. "You belong to Bibi for life, my girl. And Bibi Coupe-vide will hold his own, or——" A string of vile oaths followed.

Zélie's thin lips formed a word, but she did not give

voice to it. Instead, and forcing herself to coaxing utterance—like the purring of a cat—she vowed that Bibi was her *adoré,* and that he was foolish to doubt it.

They turned into a badly-lit side street. The sleet drove into their faces and added to Bibi's evil temper. Suddenly at the door of a wine-shop on the other side, and a little further on, Zélie's keen eyes espied a dark and familiar figure. At the same moment it flashed across her mind that they had passed a cloaked *gendarme* under a lamp-post hardly a minute ago, and that Bibi, loud in his grievances, had been less observant than she. She glanced over her shoulder—yes, the policeman was still there.

She gave her companion's arm a sharp squeeze, bringing him to a halt. Then she pointed across the street to the wine-shop.

"Bibi," she whispered hoarsely, "it's Jules—*'le daim'* —the vile scum. *Fais-lui son affaire.* Pay your debt, for now's your chance. He hasn't seen you."

Bibi required no second bidding. He had vowed vengeance upon Jules, as Jules had vowed it upon him. The one to get in the first blow was the one to whom victory belonged.

The Apache thrust the woman back and stole across the street, keeping in the shadow of the houses when he reached the other side. He was stalking his prey, the man Jules, who was drunk, and who had staggered on, alone, a few paces beyond the dimly lit shop. Zélie held her breath and watched.

"Au secours!" It was Zélie who gave the alarm before the blow had time to fall. Her cry rang out shrilly. Bibi heard it and uttered a savage oath. Jules heard it too, and turned—the next moment he was defending himself as best he could against an upraised knife.

"Help!" The cry was repeated, bringing up the policeman at a run. Jules sprawled bleeding in the gutter. Windows were thrown up, doors flung open. The whole street was in a turmoil. Bibi tried to run. but escape was quickly cut off. He was seized by a *gendarme,* while another, who had by now appeared upon the scene, knelt by the wounded man, whose groans and oaths rent the air.

Zélie had kept discreetly in the background. But Bibi knew that she had betrayed him, that his capture was due to her. Struggling with the policeman who held him, he poured out imprecations upon her head.

"Attends, ma gosse—wait till I can get at you—only wait! *Je t'arrangerai bien.* You shall pay for this—yes, with your life. I swear it—I, Bibi——" A string of foul oaths was silenced by a hand pressed over his lips, and Bibi, struggling still, was practically lifted from the ground and carried off by two sturdy policemen.

Zélie was at liberty to keep her appointment with Owen Mayne.

CHAPTER III

"It's a mad project, Owen—impossible." The speaker, Robin Clithero, frowned and stared out of the open window across the white road to the trees that marked the edge of the forest. They were now in leaf, for April was already well advanced.

Robin was at the little house near Fontainebleau, where he had been settled for some months, and he had been entertaining two guests that day—Owen Mayne and Zélie, who had come from Paris, ostensibly for a mere idle visit of a few hours, but in reality because Owen wished to make a proposition to his friend—a very remarkable proposition indeed, and one which had startled Robin more than a little.

It was not till early in the afternoon, however, that he had broached the subject. They had lunched at an inn in the forest and had then made their way back to the house. It was a warm spring day, and Zélie was in the little garden sunning herself indolently, leaving the two men to smoke and chat together.

"Don't be in such a hurry, old man," urged Owen. "Think it well over before you decide. You see, there's a fortune at stake and we are jolly hard up, both of us. Zélie has made the shekels fly, and I must have more—for her sake I must have more." He spoke in a tone of infatuation which grated upon Robin's ears. Closer acquaintance had only served to enhance the dislike which the latter bore for the snake-woman, as he was pleased to call Zélie.

"A hundred thousand pounds, at least, to divide between us, Robin, and a fine estate as well," Owen added. "And it's ours for the asking. We've only got to pick it up."

Robin Clithero whistled, then he began to laugh. "I like your way of putting things, Owen," he said. "You don't seem to realise that even a harum-scarum fool like myself hardly likes to make love to an unknown young lady—pretending to be someone else—personating his best friend."

"But at that friend's most earnest request," Owen interrupted. He was sitting easily in a cane chair and he held in his hand the lengthy and carefully worded epistle which, all unexpectedly, a day or two ago, he had received from an aunt of whose very existence he was scarcely aware.

It was really a very startling letter. Mrs. Alderson, the aunt in question, had written to say that after a vain search extending over at least two years she had at last succeeded in tracing her nephew Owen, who was the son of her only sister, from whom she had been estranged ever since her own marriage. She had some reason to believe herself at fault in the quarrel. So now that she had found her sister's child she wished to make his acquaintance, more especially as her difference with her sister weighed heavily upon her mind, and she was anxious to make what reparation she could before she died—an event which, according to the pronouncement of the doctor, could not be delayed more than two or three months.

Mrs. Alderson added that she had no other relation in the world. She had, however, adopted a sweet and beautiful girl, named Lavender Percivale—of whom a photograph was enclosed—and she would die happy if her nephew and Miss Percivale should meet and fall

in love with one another. Selwood Manor, where she lived with her ward, was a fine estate, and needed a man at the head of it. So, if Owen would come to England, if things should fall out according to her cherished desires, then Mrs. Alderson would no longer feel any difficulty as to the disposition of her property.

The letter was very explicit; it was evidently written by a woman who knew that her days in the land were numbered and who was keenly anxious to set her house in order.

"I always knew I had an aunt somewhere in England," Owen explained, "for I can remember that my father used to speak of her and how rich she was, but that I should never profit by her riches, since Aunt Anne and my mother had been at daggers drawn. My mother died when I was born, you know, and I knocked about the world with my father for years, and as I only came to Paris after he went the way of all flesh, it's not remarkable that Aunt Anne was not able to find me out. It seems that it was that quaint person Martyn who brought my aunt and me into touch. You remember he was at the ball that night I first met Zélie. He has, it appears, a country seat near Selwood. Well, he's certainly done me a good turn. There's a fortune in it, Robin, if I can only work the trick."

To Robin's more simple mind it seemed that everything was straightforward and that there was no difficulty in the way. Owen had only to accept his aunt's invitation, to proceed with the least possible delay to Selwood Manor, and thankfully take what the gods had sent. To marry a nice girl and to win a fortune and an estate at the same time—why, what could be more desirable than that?

But there was Zélie, and, as usual, Zélie stood ag-

gressively in the way. In Robin's opinion Zélie had already become the curse of his friend's life. He would have been the more sure of it had he known the truth—that Owen had been foolish enough to make the dancing-girl his wife.

But Robin did not know this. He only realised that Zélie had squandered Owen's money for him and had done much towards alienating him from his friends; then there was always the danger of trouble that might arise when that wretched Apache who bore the nickname of Bibi Coupe-vide came out of prison. He had been sentenced to six weeks only, for his enemy Jules had not been badly hurt after all, and in hospital had soon recovered. Zélie had given evidence against her former friend, and there had been a terrible scene in court, the prisoner flinging denunciation at her head and vowing vengeance upon her. Bibi was a dangerous character, there was no doubt of that. It would be well for Owen to be safely out of the country.

But Owen's infatuation had increased as time passed on. The girl's very fierceness, her utter lack of the moral sense, her passionate nature, seemed to enthral him. Robin, not knowing the truth, was yet afraid. He was keenly anxious to save his friend from a dangerous *liaison.*

One good thing Zélie had done, however; Owen, having found the model that he desired, had been induced to work. He had finished his picture—the picture of a chamois hunter treading in pursuit of his quarry a dangerous, precipitous path, whose steps had been arrested by the apparition at a turn of the way of that wonderful siren of the mountain, that evil, alluring creature, to the conception of which Zélie alone had been able to give expression. It was an astonishing piece of work, full of weird symbolism, and it had

been accepted for the Salon; but at present it was still in Owen's studio for the finishing touches, where it was to remain for another week or so. All who had seen it declared that it would make the young artist's name and set him on the high road to success.

Owen Mayne, however, did not look upon his prospects—as far as accepting his aunt's invitation was concerned—in the same light as Robin. He wanted the money, wanted it keenly, but scoffed at the implied obligation to an alliance with a girl whom he had never seen in his life and who, to judge from her photograph, was the very opposite to Zélie.

Under these circumstances he had approached Robin with the remarkable suggestion that the latter should take his place and present himself at Selwood Manor in the character of Mrs. Alderson's nephew.

"Don't you see, Robin," he urged, "there's no difficulty or danger whatever? It isn't as if you need really marry the girl at all. My aunt can't live another three months, and so all that you have to do is to make yourself very amiable, to get engaged to Miss Percivale, and then, after the old lady has made her will in her nephew's favour and peacefully departed this life, find some excuse for breaking off the marriage."

Such was the proposed plot, and Owen had done his best to induce his friend to accept it; but Robin shook his head with decision. His "no" was final. He would not be party to so mean a trick. Besides, Owen must be induced to accept his aunt's proposal. It would be his salvation.

Robin stared out of the window, inwardly pronouncing a curse upon Zélie. She was there, basking in the garden, lying her full length on the small grass-plot, letting the sun pour down on her, and she looked like a sleek tiger-cat; she appeared to be bathing herself

in the hot rays just as cats do, stretching out her lazy limbs and blinking her eyes, those hazel eyes that had such strange green lights in them.

To Robin she was as evil and sinister-looking as one of Aubrey Beardsley's creations. She made his flesh creep, and he could see no beauty in her tiny, sharply-cut face, with the crimped brown hair falling in heavy waves on each side.

Owen rose leisurely from his chair and joined his friend by the window. Here Zélie immediately caught his eyes.

"Doesn't she look beautiful," he muttered, "stretched out on the turf like that? Those slim, wonderful limbs of hers, half hidden, half revealed, moulded to her gown, her whole body drinking in the sun?"

Owen spoke with all a lover's passion, then he gave a short laugh and pulled out from his pocket the little carte-de-visite photograph which had been enclosed in his aunt's letter. He handed it to Robin.

"That's the girl's likeness," he said—"Lavender Percivale—Aunt Anne's adopted daughter. Can you imagine a greater contrast to Zélie than this poor little prim Puritan?"

He smiled contemptuously. It was obvious that he saw no beauty in the pure oval face, the soft parted bands of hair, and the sensitive lips; he missed the look of fierce, restless passion that distinguished Zélie.

Robin studied the photograph carefully, an expression of infinite tenderness coming into his eyes as he gazed upon it. "How like she is—how like," he sighed to himself, "it is as if Claire lived again!" The memory of a dead and gone romance had been aroused in him; for a few moments he stood speechless, living in the past.

Owen noticed nothing—he was staring at Zélie. "A

poor little cold thing, isn't she?" he said, alluding to the photograph. "Not my sort at all. All the same, Robin, since you won't take on the job, I must, though there'll be the devil to pay if Zélie gets wind of it. She's jealous, you know, and rather given to making passionate scenes. I like her for it."

Robin started and frowned. "You wouldn't be such a blackguard, Owen? It would be a cruel thing to let the girl fall in love with you unless you intend to marry her in the end." He rested his hand upon his friend's shoulder. "But you will, old chap; it would be absurd to ruin your life for such a woman as Zélie. I've got to see that you don't do it." Robin could not forget his debt of gratitude.

Owen gave his friend a sidelong glance and laughed queerly. "Oh, faithful mentor," he exclaimed, "guardian of my morals! So you would steer me into the safe haven of matrimony with the little Puritan! Well, well—so be it. Beggars can't afford to be choosers, and money I must have." He did not say so, but it was of Zélie he was thinking, it was for her he needed his aunt's fortune. "And I tell you what, Rob," he added, "you shall come to England with me—see me through a difficult job. I can easily write and say I am bringing my best friend, a fellow artist." It had occurred to him that Robin's company might be of service if there was trouble with Zélie later on—it would not be hard to make his friend the scapegoat.

Robin's eyes were fixed upon the photograph, which he held in his hand. He was about to reply, but checked himself abruptly, for Zélie had risen and was walking towards the window, her small, cruel-looking face thrust forward, her white, slim hands making swift darts at the butterflies that flew about—butterflies all blue and white.

"What are you talking about, you two?" she demanded curiously, half closing her eyes. Her tight cotton gown hung closely about her limbs, and her dress was open at the throat; there was a bizarre fascination about her thin, peaked face.

"We were discussing a possible run over to England for a week or so," Owen replied lightly. "Robin has just suggested it. He thinks he would like to see his native land again, and I've got some relatives in England, you know——"

Zélie glanced at him keenly—somewhat suspiciously.

"Well, you can go if you want to," she answered. Then she made a swift movement of her hand and caught at the photograph that Robin was still holding.

"*Mon Dieu,* who is this?" she demanded. "I do not know her—she is like a little wax saint."

Her eyes flashed dangerously, and she turned on Owen. "Do you know this girl?" she inquired, "or does Robin?"

Owen laughed uneasily, the blood mounting to his forehead. But before he could speak Robin had regained possession of the photograph, claiming it as his own and making some laughing remark which successfully averted the girl's suspicions. It would not do to arouse Zélie's jealousy yet—not till Owen was safe in England and out of the way of temptation—not till everything was settled.

When they parted late that afternoon all the details of the visit to England had been arranged. Zélie was to stay with a married friend at Versailles. She offered but little opposition, and it struck Robin that the prospect of a week or so of freedom was not distasteful to her.

"You'll play fair, Owen?" Robin gripped his friend's hand tightly as he bade him good-bye. "This girl—

Miss Percivale—is sweet and pure—you can tell it from her likeness. It would be a sin to hurt her."

And Owen, married man though he was, gave the required assurance, gave it with that easy charm of manner that distinguished him. "You'll be with me to see all's fair," he added with a laugh.

When his visitors had departed Robin Clithero took the photograph of Lavender Percivale and laid it on a table by the side of another photograph, one that was faded and yellow. He sat, gazing from one to the other, till the room was in darkness. There were tears in his eyes.

CHAPTER IV

A FORTNIGHT later Zélie was in Paris once more. She had soon tired of the humdrum provincial life with her friend, Berthe Lecomte, late of the "Parnasse Café Chantant," but now respectably married and with no higher ambition than the welfare of her common-place husband and her two fine, healthy babies. It was deadly dull at Versailles, and Zélie was one of those who crave for constant excitement.

It was as the breath of her life to her. Ever since she could remember, she had lived in an atmosphere of stress and storm, buffeted by breakers over which she had nevertheless ridden, laughing and mocking at their efforts to engulf her. Owen had imagined another picture for her; she should be sitting astride a piece of wreckage tossed on an angry sea—a white, defiant nymph of the depth with arms outstretched and a trail of black hair floating behind her. There should be dead men's faces in the water, too, drift and jetsam, a dark sky and the streak of lightning. But the nymph should be laughing—laughing as Zélie laughed.

Just now, however, Zélie was more than ever in a condition of unrest. Until her meeting with Owen she had imagined no existence for herself outside her own narrow, if tempestuous sphere. Her intelligence was limited by the café, the *brasserie,* the slum, and the gutter. She did not understand the art that inspired her to dance. She had herded with the lowest of the low—was of them, queen of the Apaches. All her

instincts were animal and primitive. But now, since her marriage, she was beginning to open eyes of intelligence.

To begin with, Owen had compelled her to give up dancing in public, and, to a certain extent, had weaned her from the low haunts that she would still willingly have frequented. There was an easy excuse for this—Bibi's friends might be on the look-out for Zélie and constitute themselves a danger.

Instead, Owen had taken her to smart restaurants, he had driven with her in the Bois, he had shown himself with her in the stalls of theatres on first nights when *tout Paris* was gathered together. She had aroused some attention by her bizarre appearance—at once attractive and repellent—her thin pixyish face and her lithe figure which she had the instinctive talent of draping to the best advantage. Zélie had felt herself marked out for observation and had taken pleasure in the fact. So she was absorbing knowledge, learning her strength, realising the dominion that women may hold over men—she who had been content to yield herself to the whims of a Bibi Coupe-vide and had imagined that this was all in the ordained order of things!

It was Owen who had insisted upon their marriage. The proposal had seemed absurd to her, and she had scoffed at it. But Owen was determined. He believed that by marriage alone could he make this fierce, untamed creature, who had fascinated him so strangely, really his own. Until the ceremony had been performed he was in constant dread lest she should weary and take herself out of his life as suddenly as she had come into it—and this, perhaps, even before he had transferred her likeness to the canvas upon which now he set such store. For his picture, "The Chamois

Hunter," had come to mean much to him. He saw for himself that it was a masterpiece.

It was upon the picture that he relied for funds when the remains of his meagre patrimony had been expended. But the money had flown quicker than even he had anticipated. The situation threatened to grow acute when that strange letter, with its stranger proposal, from his aunt in England reached him. When, in company with Robin, he left Paris for Selwood Manor, he had handed over to Zélie practically all that remained to him. It seemed quite a large sum to the girl, and she accepted it joyfully enough.

She had been given an address in London to which to write, but Zélie was too illiterate to care to put pen to paper without special need. Owen, however, had written three or four times, wild passionate letters in each of which he proclaimed his anxiety to return to Paris, though he gave no hint of when that return might be; also he vouchsafed no information as to his doings in England.

Zélie was of a fiercely jealous disposition. It was in her blood—blood that had in it some remote touch of the gipsy, Paris gutter-born as she was. Utterly without morals, she yet had the instinct to strike if she felt that her lover's affections were being alienated from herself. In her heart she did not blame Bibi Coupevide because he had vowed to kill her—it was nature, as she understood it.

It was partly jealousy which had brought her from Versailles to Paris. She was more than a little suspicious of what this journey to England might mean. Owen and Robin had spoken so mysteriously together —in English, of which Zélie hardly understood a word. There was that photograph, too—she was not at all sure that it really belonged to Robin. He may have

lied about it—Zélie always lied herself when she deemed it to her interest. Could it be that Owen meant to desert her now that the picture was finished—to desert her after forcing her to give up her means of regular livelihood? Dared he do so? She set her little white sharp teeth. Dared he?

And so it was that jealousy—as well as the desire for a few days' freedom—brought her one afternoon to Owen's studio in the Rue Voltaire, the studio which adjoined his tastefully furnished, if small, *appartement.* The *concierge,* a garrulous old fellow, particularly proud of his knowledge of English, was glad to see her and conducted her upstairs.

"And monsieur," he remarked, when, at Zélie's invitation, he had followed her into the little *salon* which opened directly upon the studio, "when does madame expect that monsieur will return?"

Zélie shook her head impatiently. She didn't know. She had come, she explained, to look for a letter which her husband had left in his *escritoire.*

This was, in fact, the object of her visit. She had noticed on the evening before Owen's departure that he had hastily thrust some papers away in a drawer and had refused to give her any explanation of them. She had made up her mind to look into the matter, and she had invited M. Blaize, the *concierge,* to accompany her in case his knowledge of English might be requisitioned. She had no sense of pride whatever.

Blaize continued to chatter while Zélie opened the *escritoire* with one of her own keys—she had already discovered that it would fit. The men would be coming in the next day, he announced, to remove the famous picture to the *Salon.* Did madame know that monsieur had already found a purchaser? So, at least,

Blaize had heard. A large sum, too—Blaize swelled with the pride of reflected glory.

"Read this to me, M. Blaize." Zélie cut short the worthy man's harangue by handing him a letter written on thin paper. "It is in English; translate it."

Blaize adjusted his spectacles and moved to the light of the window. Then, not without difficulty, he spelt out the letter, while Zélie stood, palpitating with excitement, by his side.

Her fears were realised. It was not long before that fact was abundantly clear. The letter was one written by Owen's aunt in response to that in which he had announced his acceptance of her proposal and his almost immediate arrival at Selwood Manor with his friend Robin Clithero.

"You shall receive a warm welcome, Nephew Owen," the old lady had written, "both from me and from Lavender, and I only live now in the hope that you and she may love each other—love and marry."

Zélie waited to hear no more. She snatched the letter from the hand of the astonished *concierge* and gave free vent to an outburst of uncontrollable passion. As Bibi Coupe-vide had threatened her, so now she hurled menaces at Owen's head. Her language was as vile, as lurid, as that of which the Apache had made use. She was transformed all at once into a fury, the humanity in her absorbed by the sheerly animal.

"Il me lâche, le gredin," she gasped, as the horrified Blaize, after a vain effort to appease her, backed out of the room. "He means to desert me—to marry an English girl. Ah—ah, it was she of the photograph—I guessed it from the first. A pink-and-white faced doll! But wait, my friend, wait. You are reckoning without Zélie."

The spirit of destruction was upon her. She seized a fine Chinese vase that stood upon a pedestal close at hand and hurled it to the floor. "But wait," she repeated, fiercely, "only wait, my good Owen. England is not far away. I can follow you—yes, I, Zélie. To-morrow I go to find you. And to-morrow—*prends garde*—see to yourself."

She stood a moment erect, her hand clenched as though, indeed, her fingers held a dagger. "To-morrow," she repeated slowly. "I am not of those whom one deserts. You shall learn it, *M. mon mari.* See to yourself, for you will have need."

CHAPTER V

THERE was no suggestion of tears in Zélie's eyes as she paraded the length of the little *salon* with the threatening stride of a caged beast.

She thrust aside anything that intruded itself in her way. A little table, set out with fragile ornaments, soon followed the way of the vase; she trod broken fragments of glass and china under her feet; she had the desire, in her mood of wild destruction to break, tear, or crush everything that came within the reach of her cruel white hands. Did they not belong to him, these things?

Suddenly she paused. The door of the studio, draped by a crimson Eastern curtain, stood partially open, and, through it, she had just caught sight of the picture upon its easel—the picture which was to make Owen Mayne's name and fortune. To-morrow it would be packed up and transferred to the *Salon*—had not Blaize said so? The woman's scarlet lips parted in a vicious, menacing smile as a thought flashed through her brain. Ah, it was well that she had come to-day?

Revenge! Why, she need not even wait till to-morrow to begin her revenge. It was in her power to strike a blow at once—here and now!

She tore the curtain aside, digging her fingers, with their pointed nails, ruthlessly into its delicate fabric, and flung into the studio.

It was in semi-obscurity, for the red blind was

drawn over the broad sloping skylight. Zélie went straight to this and attempted to manipulate the cord, but failed to do so, and very soon abandoned the effort. It did not matter: there was light enough for her purpose. Besides, the gloom was red-tinted, and it accorded with her mood.

She stepped up to the picture—*the* picture—which, covered with a cloth, stood upon its easel close to the little platform where she had been wont to pose. There was a chair upon the platform, over the back of which hung a skirt and bodice; they belonged to her, and she remembered that she had not troubled to put them away. In the half-darkness they appeared huge and grotesque, like a doubled-up and headless figure.

Zélie tore the cloth from the picture, stood a moment gazing at it, her teeth clenched, then drew up a high Moorish stool, and was about to seat herself when she noticed that Owen had left one of his pipes lying upon it. He was as careless of his belongings as she. Zélie muttered an ugly word, and swept the pipe to the floor.

Then, perched upon the stool, she resumed her examination of the picture. Her eyes glowed opalescent as she realised that here before her, at her mercy, was the work that Owen prized so highly, the work into which he had painted so much of himself—the child of his brain.

She could see it quite distinctly now, her eyes accustimed to the gloom. There sat the siren—herself—upon a narrow ledge of rock, white against the lowering blackness of the crags, her legs hanging over the precipice, her shapely arms entwined in the rich masses of black hair, from out of which peered the little, cruel face, so evil, and yet so alluring.

The siren's eyes were turned up to the Chamois

Hunter, whose path she barred. He was a strong, broad-shouldered fellow, clad in typical costume. The expression upon his good-natured face was one of surprise and wonder. Here, amid mountain fastnesses, at a bend of the way, he had encountered this marvellously white and tempting vision; his quarry had escaped him; the chamois could be dimly seen about to leap from a craggy height in the far background—but he no longer thought of the chamois.

Zélie had never read into the picture any more than she could actually see. It had no inner meaning for her. But now, as she gazed, some dim perception of the metaphor filtered into her brain. That siren was herself—woman exemplified by her—and it was in her power—as with the spirit in the picture—to lure man from his aims and ambitions, and to bring him to his knees before her. For her sake—at her bidding—he would throw himself into the gulf that yawned at his feet—shatter himself upon the stones over which she could float unharmed.

These things Zélie realised faintly, but she gave herself no time to consider them. All she cared about now was that this was Owen's work, and that upon it he fastened his future hopes. Had he himself not told her so?

Well, there should, at least, be an end to these hopes. Of so much she could be assured. Zélie rose from her stool and crossed the studio to a little cabinet where she knew that Owen kept all manner of articles which might come in useful for his painting; among them she had often noticed a fine, sharp knife of Spanish make, with a silver scabbard—this would serve her purpose excellently well.

Armed with the knife, she returned to the picture. Without another moment of hesitation she struck

straight at the heart of the Chamois Hunter. There was a vague idea at the back of her brain that Owen had represented himself in this figure. The knife pierced the canvas, and Zélie gave utterance to a low snarl—almost like that of a wild beast—as she felt the blade sink in.

Then, yielding once more to the frenzy of her passion, she struck out right and left, rending the picture into strips, destroying in a minute of time the work which, fruit of inspiration as it was, could never be restored.

"This for you, Owen Mayne—*ami Phisto*—Monsieur my husband!" she cried, as she seized the rent edges of the canvas and tore them still further asunder with her fingers. "You have not done with Zélie yet. You won her love, and now you shall know that she can hate as well. Does it hurt that I have torn your picture? Ah, but it is nothing—nothing to the pain you shall bear!"

Zélie was about to throw the knife carelessly aside, then she paused and thrust it into the bosom of her dress. There was a little red paint, she noticed, upon the scabbard, and it looked like blood.

She had grown calmer now. She remained a short while longer, hovering about the studio and the other rooms of the *appartement,* picking up anything of value that she could find and that could easily be packed into a little hand-bag; then she carefully shut the door behind her and made her way downstairs.

M. Blaize was in his office by the hall door, and he poked his head out when she appeared.

"You are going, Madame Zélie?"

She turned her head as she slipped through the small aperture in the great wooden door, the door that opened upon a paved court. "When the men come for

M. Mayne's picture to-morrow, bid them take great care, M. Blaize," she said suavely. "I should grieve if any harm befell it."

The *concierge* nodded. He watched the slim figure as it receded leisurely down the street.

Zélie had not disappeared many minutes when Blaize, still standing by the door, was accosted by a young man of distinctly unprepossessing appearance. He wore a red muffler loosely knotted about his throat, and his peaked cap was drawn low over his eyes.

"M. Mayne—the artist—does he live here?"

Blaize hesitated before he replied. He did not like the stranger's manner of speech. However, it was the *concierge's* duty to give information—discreetly.

"M. Mayne is not now in Paris. He is in England."

"Ah!" The fellow nonchalantly kicked at the kerb. "And Mlle. Zélie—a friend of M. Mayne. You know her?"

Blaize had not been without experience of the type of man with whom he was speaking. He had been brought into unpleasing relations with other Apaches. Furthermore, nature had not endowed him with the quality of courage. He had an overwhelming desire, therefore, to bring the conversation to an end as speedily as possible.

"Mlle. Zélie is not in Paris, either."

"She, too, is in England?"

"Yes." It was the quickest way out of the difficulty.

"Give me the address." The words were practically a command.

Blaize spread out his fleshy hands helplessly. "I don't know it—I give you my word."

The Apache drew a step nearer. There was menace in his tone. "That's a lie. You must have an address

for forwarding letters. Give it to me. Write it down."

Blaize was too timorous to resist. He remembered that former occasion. There had been murder done then. It was another *concierge*—a friend of his own. With a shaking hand he took a scrap of paper and a pencil and wrote: "The Delphic Club, London." It was the only address that Owen had given him.

Bibi Coupe-vide—free once more—snatched the paper from the *concierge's* hand, and, after glancing at it, thrust it into his pocket. Then with a muttered *"Merci!"* and a surly nod he lounged away.

Over a glass of absinthe at a neighbouring café he scrutinised the writing again. "London," he muttered to himself. "Well, there's Alphonse Lereux settled comfortably in London. Alphonse will be delighted to see his old friend Bibi, and he's been making his fortune, they say." There was an evil smile on the man's lips as the thought flashed through his brain.

"Yes," he continued, emptying his glass at a gulp. "Paris isn't healthy for Bibi just now. There are too many of Jules's friends about—to say nothing of Jules himself. A change of scene is what's wanted. To London be it—and look to yourself, Zélie, my dear—when I find you!"

CHAPTER VI

Zélie left Paris upon the following day, taking the train for Calais and London, and, for the first time in her life, turning her back upon her native country.

Her first intention had been to travel the same night —at once—but it had been necessary for her to return to Versailles in order to get Owen's letters. She was not certain if he was in London or at the house of his aunt in the country—he had certainly spoken of the country, but, on the other hand, she believed that he had written from London; at least it was certainly a London address with which he headed his letters. She verified this later as the Delphic Club—which meant very little to her, and did not strike her as insufficient.

There was no address at all upon the letter which she had carried off from the studio; it had been torn off, evidently by the young man himself.

She wanted money, too, and to pack up her clothes and other necessities of travel. She had no intention of undertaking a journey without providing for her personal comfort. All of which rendered the delay necessary, a delay which, though she was blissfully unconscious of the fact, saved her from a very unpleasant meeting—for Bibi Coupe-vide only preceded her across the Channel by a few hours. Bibi, however, was very far from Zélie's thoughts just then. She had not even realised that he had come out of prison.

Zélie found, on reaching Versailles, that Berthe Lecomte and her husband were away from home. This

did not matter much. Zélie packed her things, taking all the money she had, and returned to Paris, putting up at a small and, truth to tell, rather disreputable hotel near the Gare du Nord, the proprietress of which was an acquaintance of hers.

The journey was comparatively uneventful. Certainly there was something of a scene at Cannon Street when Zélie, imagining that she had arrived at her destination, had got out on the platform with her belongings and had only realised her mistake just as the train was about to start once more. She had been bundled back breathless into the carriage, and had sunk down upon the seat muttering imprecations, in the coarsest Montmartre slang, upon everything that was foreign and English.

There was a respectable British matron, with an insipid-looking daughter, travelling in the same compartment, and they had cast horrified eyes upon her, guessing instinctively that her remarks were not good to hear; it was, indeed, lucky for them that they could not understand.

They had left the train at Waterloo, and Zélie was alone when she reached Charing Cross. She stared up and down the long platform, and realised nothing but bustle and confusion, all seen dimly through a haze of fog which had penetrated the station.

"Is this London?" She ventured to ask at last of a red-bearded porter, who stared at her for a moment, and then, grasping the significance of the question, responded gruffly: "Yes, miss, this is London, Charing Cross. You get out here. *Tout-le-monde-déscend.*" He spoke the words slowly and with emphasis, proud of his knowledge of the French language. "Shall I take your luggage, miss? Where are you going to?"

Zélie had not the remotest idea. She had not given

the matter a thought. She was utterly unaccustomed to travelling, had never been more than fifty miles away from Paris in her life. And now she was far too dazed to give any serious consideration to the question.

In the meanwhile the porter had seized her hand-bag, and was apparently making off with it. Zélie followed him along the platform, protesting loudly. Luckily, at that moment help appeared in the shape of a liveried interpreter, who quietly took the case in hand. With his assistance Zélie was initiated into the mysteries of the Custom House, her luggage was passed and finally taken charge of by a porter from a neighbouring hotel, Zélie having explained that she had no choice in the matter, and did not mind where she put up for the night.

She was allotted a room upon the first floor, but in a far corner. It seemed to her as if she walked down interminable passages and corridors to reach it. She had never before been in a large and important hotel. The bustle and movement confused her—made her head swim.

She was most utterly out of her element and vaguely realised the fact. As was usual with her, she had acted wholly upon impulse, and had no definite plan whatever in her mind. She had vowed to find Owen. In many ways—in her ignorance and lack of knowledge of the world outside her own sphere—she was like a child. She was only old in vice.

After an hour's rest, however, she felt refreshed and her spirits revived. She changed her dress, selecting a walking frock of grey, which suited her and which Owen had always admired. She paid a good deal of attention to her hair, fluffing it up over her ears in the way that he liked to see it, and her hat was one which he himself had selected for her.

Owen, who had an artistic eye for what was correct and appropriate in a woman's dress, had been instrumental in training her against the exaggeration which she might otherwise have affected. His love of the *outré* had prevented him from attempting to refine her in other ways, but, as far as appearance went, Zélie could hold her own.

Never in her life, she told herself, had she felt so utterly alone as now. It was this that kept the fire of her rage against Owen aflame. She stared out of window at a narrow, dismal street with a strip of leaden sky showing dimly through the mist, and her heart yearned for the lights and the laughter of her beloved cafés. She craved for absinthe, too.

But she had her work to do—whatever it might prove to be—and so, with a grim smile playing upon her red lips, she once more secreted about her person the silver-mounted dagger, and made her way, not without difficulty, downstairs to the hall. Here there was the bustle of a recently arrived train, and Zélie was thrust that way and this before she ventured to make an inquiry at the office, where there was a young lady who spoke French.

She asked how she could best reach the Delphic Club, and was advised, since she spoke no English, to take a taxi-cab.

It was only a short drive, but Zélie, gazing out of window, found little to admire in what she saw. Where were the cafés, with their brilliantly lighted windows, their rows of little tables, their crowds of absinthe and beer drinking customers? Everyone seemed busy and in a hurry, even at this hour of the evening. She imagined that the Strand must be a quite unimportant thoroughfare. And she felt lonely, terribly lonely.

She had but little time for reflection, however, for

very shortly the taxi-cab turned into a quieter street and drew up at a lighted doorway.

Zélie descended from the cab and walked boldly in. There were several men in the hall, who stared discreetly at this feminine apparition, but Zélie, holding her head high, addressed herself without hesitation to the hall porter.

"I wish to see Mr. Owen Mayne."

She spoke in French, and the porter stared, failing to grasp her meaning. This was a kind of visitor to whom he was unaccustomed. Zélie repeated her request in a slightly louder tone.

Luckily she found an interpreter in the person of a good-looking young man with closely-cut fair hair and clean-shaven face. He wore evening dress.

"Can I be of any service?" he inquired, addressing her in her own language. "I'm afraid the porter does not understand you."

Zélie was grateful. "I wish to see Mr. Owen Mayne," she repeated for the third time. This is the address which he gave me—the Delphic Club."

She spoke the words with a queer little lisp, and the Englishman raised his eyebrows with a semi-humorous expression. His keen eyes were scrutinising the girl's face, too—he could not quite make up his mind whether she were repulsively ugly or astonishingly attractive.

He spoke a few words to the porter. "I'm afraid Mr. Mayne is not in the club," he said then. "The porter tells me, in fact, that Mr. Mayne is not at present in London."

"Ah! Then he is in the country with his aunt," returned Zélie. "I shall have to go to him there. Will you kindly ask could they give me his address?"

The Englishman raised his brows. This was really a very persistent young woman. There was a danger-

ous glitter in her eyes, too. He was rather inclined to think that Mr. Owen Mayne, whom he did not know even by repute, was in for troublous times.

He spoke to the porter again, then turned to the girl with a smile. "I'm afraid they can't oblige you with what you require," he explained. "It's against the rules of the club."

"They won't give me the address!" Zélie's jaw fell and her eyes flashed with indignation. This was an unexpected set-back, and she was inclined to look upon it as a plot specially devised against herself.

The young Englishman explained further. "It is not customary to give members' addresses. Of course, any letters are immediately forwarded if a request has been made for them. I understand that Mr. Mayne makes but small use of the club, that he is, indeed, only very rarely in England."

Zélie was asking herself what she was to do. She was tapping the floor impatiently with the toe of her narrow boot. The action aroused the attention of the young man. What remarkably small feet she had, and what a strangely lithe figure. He was beginning to think that she was quite attractive; the type was new to him, and novelty had a wonderful charm for Stephen Aldis. But what fierce eyes and cruel lips!

It was at this moment, just as Zélie appeared disposed to give way to an outbreak of wrath, that an interruption occurred in the person of a big, broad-shouldered man, who wore a black beard, and who for some moments had been scrutinising Zélie from under peculiarly heavy brows. He had emerged from a room on the ground floor, and was putting a cloak on over his evening dress, evidently with the intention of going out, when the little scene that was going on by the porter's box had attracted his attention.

"Unless I'm very much mistaken," he said now, his eyes still fixed upon Zélie, "I'm acquainted with this young lady." He smiled, his white teeth gleaming behind the heavy beard. Then he addressed himself directly to the girl, speaking in fluent French. "Isn't it Mlle. Zélie of the Florian?" he inquired. "Yes, I'm sure it is."

He extended a large, strong hand, which Zélie took readily enough. She had a vague recollection of having seen this big Englishman with his black beard and his bronzed cheeks before, though she could not recall the circumstances of their acquaintance.

"Don't you remember?" he said, "I met you several times at the Florian, when I went there to see my friend Dubois, who runs the show? And the last time I ran across you was at Le Moulin de la Bonne Fortune last Shrove Tuesday. You were with my friend Mayne, I recollect, and he looked daggers at me because I dared to claim your acquaintance. So I made myself scarce pretty sharply, you bet." The man laughed broadly; he was possessed of peculiarly easy manners, and gave Zélie the impression of belonging to the Bohemian class to which she was accustomed. His presence, the tone of his voice, seemed to charm away the sense of loneliness which had been oppressing her—it was like coming across an oasis in the desert.

"I remember," she exclaimed. "Yes, I remember quite well. But I have forgotten your name."

"I'm Lord Martyn," he said; then he laughed again. "Queer thing, eh? You wouldn't believe it of me. But it's a fact. However, all my friends call me Harry, too, if you like."

Zélie remembered now with something of a thrill. This *Milor Anglais* had been introduced to her at the disreputable little café where she had been wont to per-

form, and she had been told that he was immensely wealthy—a millionaire. She had noticed him in the theatre, before he had actually spoken to her, on more than one occasion. She had fancied he stared at her. He was eccentric, she had been told; but then, are not all the English eccentric?

"You disappeared altogether after that night," Lord Martyn continued. "What the deuce became of you? I went to the Florian, because I had an idea in my mind in which you were concerned. But they couldn't, or wouldn't, tell me anything. And now what are you doing in England, eh—here at the Delphic, of all places? Is it that rascal Aldis who has brought you? I'm surprised at you, Steve."

He slapped the other man heartily on the back. But Steve Aldis hastened to repudiate the suggestion.

"I'm afraid I can't claim acquaintance with this lady," he said. "She came to the club to ask for a man named Mayne, who doesn't happen to be here. I don't know him, so couldn't help her."

"Owen Mayne? That's the chap I spoke of just now," returned the big man. "I didn't know he belonged to the Delphic, for he was always a fixture in Paris. But he's a friend of mine and ought to be pretty grateful to me, for I did him a good turn quite lately." He chuckled at the recollection. "I was the means," he continued, "of bringing him and his aunt, dear old Mrs. Alderson, of Selwood Manor, together. And that means a lot for Owen Mayne, I can tell you."

Selwood Manor! That was the name of the place which Owen had mentioned as his destination and which had escaped Zélie's memory. She had learnt what she wanted to know in most unexpected fashion. And now some intuition within her told her that she

must be discreet and not betray the purpose of her visit to England.

"My own place is near Selwood, within five miles of it," Lord Martyn resumed, "so I often see Mrs. Alderson, who is the dearest old lady on the face of the earth." Here he broke off suddenly and cast a sharp glance at the girl from under his bushy brows. "But what's the idea in asking for Owen Mayne?" he inquired. "What do you want of him, eh?"

Zélie could lie readily. She lied now. It was evident to her that, if she betrayed her real purpose, her true relationship to Owen Mayne, she might well be regarded with disfavour.

"I came to England to look for an engagement," she said readily. "I thought a change would be agreeable. And Monsieur Mayne, he promised that he would help me."

"Ah, that's it, is it?" replied the man, with some relief in his tone. "Well, if it comes to that, I expect I can do more for you than Mayne could." He glanced at the clock. "But, look here," he resumed, "you'd better come along with me and have some dinner. As it happens, I'm free to-night. Then we can talk it over. What do you say?"

Zélie eagerly accepted the invitation. Lord Martyn turned to the younger man. "Will you come, too, Steve?" he asked.

Stephen Aldis hesitated. "I had an engagement," he faltered. Then his eyes met those of Zélie. "Yes, I shall be very happy to join you," he said.

CHAPTER VII

It was not yet eight o'clock, and so, a sudden inspiration that it would be the right thing seizing her, Zélie paused before stepping into the motor brougham, which was awaiting Lord Martyn, and asked whether it might not be possible to return to the hotel first in order that she might change into an evening gown.

She had an intuitive feeling that this meeting would be fraught with great consequences. Her brain worked quickly—within its groove—and she was naturally shrewd. The English *Milor* was a man of great wealth; at the Florian, as she remembered now, they had spoken of his generosity, as well as of his eccentricity, with bated breath. And he was palpably interested in her; she was sure of that, too, both from what he had said and by the way he had looked at her out of those keen grey eyes of his.

And so she wanted to look her best. She was heartily thankful that she had not left Paris in a hurry, but had had the good sense to pack up her most becoming gowns.

Lord Martyn assented with a smile. "It will be ever so much better," he said. "Not that I mind for myself—I once took a flowergirl with a red shawl over her shoulders to lunch at the 'Regent'—but since it will be your first appearance in public in London, Zélie, you're bound to be stared at." He knew from experience that any woman would be stared at who happened to be in his company. "If you've got a really smart

frock," he added, "we'll go to the Pallanza. That will be a good opening."

And so the little party of three drove to the hotel, where Zélie left the two men to discuss *apéritifs* in the lounge while she found her way, not without considerable difficulty, to her bedroom. She had noticed, with delight, as she passed with her companions through the hall, that they were recognised, and that she herself appeared to be regarded with new respect.

She laughed to herself as she allowed her grey walking dress to slip to the floor, and laughed again triumphantly, as she stood up, bare-shouldered, to gaze at her reflection in the mirror upon the dressing-table.

"Queen of the Apaches," she muttered, " a siren of the mountains—what next? Who can say?" Owen Mayne and her revenge had no part in her thoughts at that moment.

But presently she turned petulantly away from the mirror. There was a flaw in the glass, and it seemed to distort the face that looked back at her. It was as if the red lips sneered.

After a few minutes she moved to the window, and, drawing the blind aside, gazed down into the street. It was as if she obeyed some irresistible impulse, for she had already gauged the unattractiveness of the scene without.

Narrow though the street was upon which she looked there was yet considerable traffic in it. Zélie gazed idly up and down. The fog had cleared away somewhat, but thin rain was falling and the pavement was damp and greasy. There was a brilliantly lighted tobacconist's shop just opposite, and beyond that several dark houses.

It was in the shadow of one of these that Zélie of a

sudden caught sight of a figure that had a strangely familiar aspect. She drew a deep, panting breath.

"Mon Dieu," she muttered, gripping at her throat with nervous fingers. "Bibi! But it isn't possible—it isn't possible!"

The man stood there motionless, unaffected by the movement about him. Zélie could almost imagine that he was gazing up at her window. It was almost as if he held her eyes with his.

Of course, it was an accidental resemblance—or so Zélie told herself—but straightway and without voluntary effort her thoughts flew back to a sordid garret, and it seemed to her of a sudden as if there were a sharp pain in her shoulder—where once she had been struck by the knife of her Apache lover.

"A Bibi pour la vie." The tattoo marks upon her arm, the bare white arm that held the blind back, sprang into aggressive prominence. For life! And Bibi had threatened her—she could see his face now as, in court, he had poured out imprecations upon her head.

Supposing—only supposing—Bibi Coupe-vide should be following her as she was following Owen Mayne—Bibi, with vengeance in his heart and a sharp knife hidden somewhere about his person!

Zélie allowed the blind to flap back to its place. "It's a delusion," she told herself.

But Zélie was wrong. It was no delusion. It was Bibi himself whom she had seen, though he, of course, was unconscious of her eyes fixed upon him.

Bibi had loitered all day about the Delphic Club on the chance of meeting Owen Mayne. He had been afforded no information at the club itself, had, indeed, been treated with considerable abruptness, and, un-

fortunately for him, he could not apply the methods which had been so successful with M. Blaize.

And so it had come about that, unseen, he was witness of Zélie's visit to the club. He had watched her departure too, and had tracked the brougham, the progress of which was slow, through the traffic to the hotel.

Bibi Coupe-vide had struck the trail. But Zélie, as she selected her smartest gown, laughed to herself at the delusion which, for a moment, had frightened her. No—in spite of that mark upon her arm she was rid of Bibi for ever. So she assured herself—in her ignorance.

CHAPTER VIII

"I DON'T know what to make of her. I've never seen anyone quite like her before—and I've had experience of women too."

So spoke Stephen Aldis. He was an actor by profession, and had achieved something of a name as "juvenile lead." His good looks had made him a great favourite with women, and he was always inundated with letters from feminine admirers. So he only spoke the bare truth when he claimed a knowledge of the sex.

Lord Martyn and Stephen Aldis were sitting in the lounge of the hotel, waiting for Zélie. She had already been the best part of half an hour changing her dress, but that was only what the two men had expected, and, after all, there was no hurry.

"She is uncommon," mused Lord Martyn, pensively sipping his *apéritif,* a remarkable and potent concoction of his own invention. "Uncommon is perhaps not altogether a strong enough word. One might say that there is something hardly human about her."

"Yes, I feel that," returned the other, bending forward to light a fresh cigarette. "My first impression was very distinct—I told myself I had never seen so repellent a creature. But, then, when she looks at you out of those black, shining eyes of hers you feel magnetised, as it were. And then her lips—have you noticed her lips, Harry?"

Lord Martyn stroked his black beard with a hand

that was white and strong. "Look here, young man," he said gravely, "you'd best not think too much of Mlle. Zélie's eyes and lips. They are dangerous. Those lips of hers by themselves are like a red danger signal. You're a man of experience, and a word to the wise—it's an old saw, but true." He blew a cloud of smoke from his mouth and stared for a moment at the long black cigar he held between his fingers. Lord Martyn's cigars were always the terror of his friends.

"Do you know why that woman is different to others?" he resumed, after a brief pause. "Do you know what it is that she lacks?"

For a moment Aldis had been inclined to resent being preached to—but he knew his friend's outspoken way. He shook his head.

"She lacks the one thing that makes human creatures human," was Martyn's reply. "She hasn't got a soul. She's like a wild animal in the shape of a woman—or perhaps a snake. In Paris they called her *Zélie la Couleuvre,* though I expect that was because of her lithe and subtle body. You should see her dance, Steve—I tell you she writhes from feet to head, and as for her arms, when she folds them about her, they are like two clinging serpents. I went to see her night after night at the Florian. She fascinated me. I meant to take her in hand then, but, as I told you, I lost sight of her."

"It's jolly interesting," said Aldis, "and a woman without a soul is by way of being a novelty, what? You're always discovering queer types, Harry; it seems to be a speciality of yours. What do you propose to do with Mademoiselle Zélie now you've found her?"

"Launch her on the English stage, of course," responded Martyn promptly. "I tell you the British public, the staid and Puritan British public, will rise

and proclaim her a heaven-born genius. She'll make a fortune for herself and for the theatre that brings her out. Society is craving for a new sensation, and there's a tendency to look for it in the gutter. We are ready to exalt the Apache and the Hooligan. We've seen a lot of imitations—but Zélie is the real thing—cruel to her finger-tips, without a moral sense about her, reeking of the slum, offspring of what and what only Heaven—or the devil—knows, vicious because vice is her nature. What can Society ask for more than that?" The man spoke with biting sarcasm. "Even Dubois of the Florian gave her a bad character," he went on; "said she associated with thieves—and worse. There was a charming gentleman I saw in her company—Bibi something or other—a regular Apache. But Zélie has evidently gone up in the world since then. She's been looking about her and learning things. It makes her all the more dangerous for those who can't see behind the veneer."

"For, in spite of veneer, she hasn't developed a soul," mused Aldis. "I can see that you're right there, Harry."

"No, and it's just because she hasn't a soul that she will go so far. You mark my words, old fellow, for I know what I'm talking about. I've come across the type before in my wanderings. I've met it in Mexico —in the East—I've seen it in London. I've recognised it among the highly-born and among the scum of the people. It very rarely comes to the surface, so the world doesn't know of it. As a rule, it dies as it has lived—dies, as Zélie might, in some filthy court, in the workhouse, in an asylum for the insane, or perhaps by the knife of one of its fellows. It is women of this type who take to drugs, who commit all manner of secret sin. Put power into the hands of such a one and

she will ride rough-shod over humanity—she will crush it down beneath her cruel heels. That's because she is soulless. But woe betide the woman—woe betide Zélie—if ever a soul is born within her. For I've seen that, too—yes, my God, I've seen the tragedy of a new-born soul!"

Lord Martyn had been speaking with more feeling than he was wont to show. As a rule, he adopted a tone of careless *insouciance.*

He was a man who knew the world better than most. He had probed it to its very depths. Wealth had come to him by his own efforts; he owed nothing to his birth and parentage.

The inheritance of a title had not seemed even remotely possible. It had come about through an altogether remarkable series of accidents and sudden deaths which, all unexpectedly, placed him in the position of next-of-kin. He was living somewhere in the wilds of Mexico at the time, and there had been considerable difficulty in finding him and bringing him over to England in order that he might claim his rights. That was barely three years ago, and to the cosmopolitan Henry Flint, the builder of his own fortune, it seemed an excellent joke that he, of all people in the world, should be expected to take his place in the midst of a county society that was eminently staid and respectable. Chamney Castle, the ancestral seat of the Martyns, was on the border of Buckinghamshire, and the new baron was, at first, regarded with anything but eyes of favour by the neighbourhood. His reputation had preceded him.

Born in a miners' camp, he had been left an orphan when little more than a child. He had learnt to face and fight the world at a time when other children were scarcely out of the nursery. Fate had treated him

kindly—perhaps because he had always scoffed at Fate. He had built up a fortune for himself by devious ways—no one knew exactly how, though he had no lack of candour in speaking of himself and his affairs.

He had ranched in Texas, he had mined in the Yukon, farmed in Canada; he was the hero of a celebrated "corner" that had shaken Wall Street to its very foundations; there was scarcely a part of the world, civilised and uncivilised, of which he could not discourse from personal acquaintance; he had penetrated further into the heart of Asia than most explorers; he could adapt himself to his environment in the most remarkable manner, equally at home in the jungle, in the Quartier Latin, and in Pall Mall.

But he had a fine disregard for the conventions, and was not afraid of proclaiming his unorthodoxy. He shocked his respectable neighbours by his outspoken criticisms of them, as well as by the company he was wont to entertain at Chamney. He had no mind to cover himself with the veneer of artificiality. The most unpardonable sins in Lord Martyn's eyes were cant and humbug.

As might well be expected, his life had been full of romance. It was hinted that he had a grudge against Society, a grudge which accounted for his attitude of contempt for humanity at large.

Stephen Aldis emptied his glass. "I see," he said; "and I think you are right in your deductions, Harry. You usually are. All the same"—his eyes narrowed —"isn't it a dangerous game that you propose to play? Someone is bound to be hurt. Isn't it rather like letting loose a caged panther, nourishing a snake in order that it may sting? Hadn't Zélie better go back to her gutter?"

"What do I care?" Martyn shrugged his broad

shoulders. "Society must look to itself. It's a fine sport, my friend, to play with fire. We all love it, grown-up children that we are; you and I are no exception. You're quite ready to improve your acquaintance with my snake-woman—I can see that." He smiled knowingly and continued: "What we crave for to-day is the new sensation, the something that is unlike anything that has gone before, the *bizarre,* the unnatural—that's what Society demands not only upon the stage, but in everyday life—in its very drawing-rooms. So you see, Steve, that if I give Mlle. Zélie to the world, the world should be obliged to me."

He spoke satirically, his white teeth gleaming behind his beard. "It's every man for himself, Steve, my boy," he added, "and every woman for herself. The eternal contest. The looker-on has the best of it—especially if he can move the pawns."

At that moment the subject of their conversation appeared in the doorway, and the two men rose quickly and joined her. Zélie had unconsciously dressed herself to suit the part which they had allotted to her. She wore a demi-toilette, such as she had been accustomed to don when dining out with Owen at some smart restaurant. She had chosen black because Owen had always said that black suited her best. And Owen was an artist. The gown was moulded closely to her form and the bodice scintillated with jet. She wore heavy jet pendants in her ears. Her face, very white and pale in contrast to the black of her dress, peeped out from under a large picture hat, extravagantly adorned with ostrich feathers.

Lord Martyn gazed at her critically and with appreciation. "You'll do," he said, abruptly. Then, as they were about to pass out of the hotel, he laid his hand upon her arm.

"One moment," he exclaimed. "I think a touch of colour will heighten the effect."

There was a flower stall by the door and here Lord Martyn purchased a rose in full bloom. It was the colour of blood. He pinned it himself into Zélie's bodice. She smiled as he did so, well pleased.

CHAPTER IX

A TAXI-CAB conveyed them to the famous Café Pallanza, the smart semi-Bohemian resort where Lord Martyn had elected to dine. It was already so crowded that they would certainly not have been accommodated with a table had not his lordship been well known to the cheery little proprietor—a popular character and quite a celebrity in his own way.

Zélie was excited, pleased with herself, conscious that she was looking at her best—this, despite the fatigue of an unwonted journey and the desperate project which had inspired her to leave her beloved Paris. London was no longer a hateful place in her eyes, a city of fog, bustle and confusion. It was in her nature to live in the present, and the present was showing itself to be altogether delightful.

Never before had she realised so fully the curious magnetism of her personality; never before had she received such open homage. She was keen-witted enough to understand that she was not in the company of ordinary, every-day kind of people; that fact was self-evident, if only from the manner in which they were received at the restaurant.

Everyone had turned to look at them, and Zélie was happily aware that she was the centre of attraction. Such smart women, too, and such distinguished-looking men! How different it all was to the low cafés and *brasseries* which had been her haunt not so many

months ago; she had never set foot inside a smart restaurant until she had gone there with Owen. But even then she had felt herself out of her element, dependent—now she was free, her own mistress. She was possessed of a new sense—it was that of power.

She adapted herself with natural shrewdness to these fresh circumstances; she appeared calmly indifferent to the attention which she aroused. Zélie, in her black clinging gown and with the red rose at her breast, was a figure that people would have turned to look at anywhere, but just now, since she was in the company of two such prominent figures as Martyn and Aldis, she was naturally subjected to the keenest scrutiny.

People were making whispered remarks; she knew that they referred to herself and was delighted. She fancied she could read disapproval in the women's eyes, but the men—ah, they turned their heads not once, but again and again.

Lord Martyn was an adept at ordering a dinner. The food that was set before them was of the choicest, while the wine flowed as freely as Zélie could desire. Her heart warmed under the influence of it, and she gave free vent to her natural wild spirits. She threw restraint aside. She was herself, fierce, primitive, untrammelled by convention.

Martyn watched her through half-closed eyes, filling her glass whenever she held it out to him. There was a smile of amusement upon his lips. And Aldis—it was as if the champagne—or something else—had got into his blood too. He was lifted, as it were, into a new element. The familiar restaurant was no longer the same. He might have been in the very heart of Paris. And Zélie was responsible for this.

It was when dinner was concluded, and coffee and liqueurs set before them, that Lord Martyn, lighting

up one of the strong, dark cigars that he affected, unfolded his plans.

"You want to go on the English stage, Zélie?" he said. "You want to show London how you can dance? Well, if I'm any judge, you'll make a success, and if I had not lost sight of you in Paris, I should have proposed your visiting England. It's just luck that we've met again. I shall introduce you to my friend Radcliffe, of the Star Theatre, who'll put you through your paces. But, in the meanwhile, I've got something else in view. I want you to come down to Chamney Castle, my place in Buckinghamshire, to take part in an entertainment which I am giving there on Thursday next. To-day's Saturday, so it's five days from now."

He turned, with a half smile, to Aldis. "The Duchess is coming for the first time," he remarked, "and a lot of other county nobs. I guess Zélie will make 'em sit up. They'll either hate me more than ever or hail her as a genius—it remains to be seen which."

Aldis laughed heartily. "I'm glad you've extended an invitation to me, Harry," he remarked. He handed Zélie a pear as he spoke. "But if you ask my opinion, I don't mind betting that the Duchess of Shiplake takes to Zélie at once. She's a good sportswoman, the Duchess, and there's no humbug about her."

The two men had been talking in English, and Zélie had been giving herself up to the contemplation of all that Lord Martyn's invitation—which she had accepted at once—meant for her. Now she sank her sharp teeth into the luscious fruit which Aldis had set before her, disdaining a knife, and her black eyes glittered and shone.

For she had not forgotten that Chamney Castle was

within a mile or so of Selwood Manor. She would meet Owen, and under what astonishing circumstances! Ah! he would see that she had not suffered by his desertion of her; that he had not hurt her as perhaps he imagined he had done. She could laugh at him and mock him—him and his pink-cheeked saint!

But she would have to wait a day or so longer, and it had been her instinct not to lose a moment more than could be avoided. Ah, but that was when the hot blood was surging through her veins, when every fibre of her being was quivering in the consciousness of the insult that had been offered her. She was no less vindictive now, as keenly anxious for that revenge which she had promised herself; but—Zélie looked about her and saw the smiling faces of her companions, the rich dresses of the women who thronged the restaurant, caught the glimmer of gems, the gleam of white, bare shoulders. An invisible band made soft music in her ears, and in her nostrils was the perfume of flowers and femininity—that peculiar, intoxicating scent which hangs over a fashionable assembly. She caught the light ring of laughter, and she was laughing too—forgetful of everything save that she was Woman Triumphant, and that she had been brought to the threshold of her kingdom.

Stephen Aldis watched as Zélie, regardless of appearance, continued to bite her pear. Those little sharp teeth had a fascination for him, none the less potent because he knew it to be morbid. Her eyes, too, with their indefinable emerald glint—why did all the pulses of his body tingle whenever he felt that her eyes were turned to him?

It was ridiculous—he! Why, he was behaving like a mere schoolboy, and Martyn, observant always, would have good reason to laugh at him. "It's just because

she's a new type to me," Aldis muttered to himself. "I expect the twentieth century is beginning to pall. With Zélie one thinks of primitive creatures in caves and forests, hardly human, and wholly cruel and unrestrained. Martyn is right. It's dangerous—but it fascinates."

And so, regardless of the good-natured sneer with which his friend observed him, Aldis made no further efforts to keep himself in curb. The wine had mounted to his head, but it was not with wine that he was intoxicated so much as with the subtle, irresistible magnetism that emanated from Zélie.

Aldis and Zélie were seated together on one side of the table, while Lord Martyn faced them. Close at hand was a staircase that led to a gallery where dinners were also served. This staircase was visible to Martyn, but his companions had their backs turned to it; thus the latter did not perceive how two ladies, both very fashionably attired and wearing rich opera cloaks, paused and looked down over the banister at the little party below.

Aldis had been making some laughing remark to Zélie, who sat, a cigarette between her lips, in her favourite attitude, her elbows resting on the table, her fingers crossed beneath her chin. The younger of the two women upon the stairs gave a little start, and her pink cheeks flushed as she recognised Stephen Aldis. She was very fair and almost doll-like in her artificiality, but she was a clever actress, and had already made a name for herself—or rather it was Aldis, with whom she had recently acted in a play that was a palpable success, who had brought her into prominence.

Lord Martyn realised the situation and smiled; then he half rose in his seat and waved his hand.

"There's a friend of yours been in the gallery all the time without seeing us, Steve," he said. "It's Miss Cuthbert. She's with Mme. de Freyne. What a piece of luck! Mme. Eve is the woman of all others whom I most wanted to meet just now." He beckoned laughingly, as he spoke, to the two ladies, who slowly descended the stairs.

Aldis had turned his head, too experienced to evince any agitation or annoyance. But he cast a glance over his shoulder at Martyn, with a suggestive drawing down of his lips. "I'd promised to fetch Cecily and take her out to dinner to-night," he said in a half whisper. "Who'd have dreamed that she must elect to come to the Pallanza?"

The newcomers threaded their way to the table, where the two men rose to receive them. Zélie remained seated, her chin still resting on her fingers, the cigarette hanging between her lips. A certain defiance had sprung into her eyes. It was in her nature to regard her own sex with suspicion.

Aldis was making his apologies as best he could. He told conventional lies in a graceful tone that forced conviction. He had been detained upon business, he explained, till he feared it was too late to carry out his promise; he felt certain that Miss Cuthbert—Cecily—would not expect him after eight and would understand. He had proposed to call later on and obtain forgiveness.

Cecily Cuthbert was quickly mollified—or perhaps she realised that it was politic to appear so. Stephen Aldis, in his quality of a manager, proposed shortly to produce a new play and there was a part in it which appealed very particularly to Cecily. Furthermore, a report had gone abroad which hinted that the handsome actor-manager was really at last contemplating

matrimony, and her name and his had been coupled together. Aldis had never troubled to contradict the rumour, though he knew of it; indeed, he had been particularly attentive to her of late. As for Cecily herself, she did not make any secret of her passion for the popular actor; it was quite usual for Aldis's many admirers to express their devotion in exaggerated phrases.

Cecily was a beauty of repute, and her artificiality was of her age. How can a woman be natural when she has to devote so much time to posing for her photograph? Cecily had already acquired that chief symptom of the disease—the set smile. It was a pity, because there was a good deal of humanity behind all the pretence—and more than a little talent.

Never, Aldis thought, had he seen greater contrast between any two women than between Zélie and Cecily, as Martyn introduced one to the other. A picture presented itself spontaneously to his mind. It was that of a lap-dog, the pampered product of art and science, suddenly brought face to face with crude nature in the shape of a wolf. And yet, mysteriously, the same blood ran in the veins of both.

It was true enough that Cecily had pleased and captivated him—even that he had seriously contemplated making her his wife. A good fellow at heart, he had been spoilt by too openly-exposed admiration. He had come to believe himself infallible with women. In her way Cecily was almost as much be-puffed and belauded as he—yet she had held herself aloof for his sake. He knew it and was flattered. Besides, had he not given her her start on the stage, helped her to cut herself adrift from an uncongenial home-life—eminently high-class and respectable—in order that her

talents might have full swing? He felt himself, in a manner, responsible for her future.

And now—well, his sentiments were wholly unchanged, but why should he feel annoyance at this meeting of Zélie and Cecily? He was unpleasantly conscious of Lord Martyn's satirical smile as the latter watched the two women. Did Martyn, too, see the analogy of the lap-dog and the wolf?

The difficulties of introduction over, the whole party settled down again harmoniously at the table, and Lord Martyn proceeded to explain how Zélie had come to England with the idea of obtaining an engagement to dance on the music-hall stage.

"Which brings me to my point," he continued, addressing himself to Cecily's companion, a woman of middle-age, with a strong masculine face, keen steel-blue eyes, and a skin that looked as if it had been turned brown by exposure. "You, my dear Eve"—he spoke with the familiarity of intimate acquaintance—"are just the woman I wanted to see. I'm going to ask you to do me a favour—and refuse at your peril." He shook his forefinger laughingly at her. "I know the tricks of the trade, you know."

"Speak, oh, king," said Mme. de Freyne in mock heroic tone. She had a deep voice that harmonised with her appearance.

"I want you to take charge of Mlle. Zélie for the next three or four days at any rate. She's a stranger in London, knows nobody, and doesn't speak a word of English. She's putting up at present at the Northumberland Hotel. I'd like you to take her to your flat to-morrow. You're coming to Chamney next Wednesday, so you could bring Mlle. Zélie with you. I've got to run down on Monday myself, as that's the day

the house-party begins to assemble. What do you say?"

"You want me to be Mlle. Zélie's chaperon?" The journalist—for such was Mme. de Freyne's profession—puffed at her cigarette unconcernedly. She was always remarkable for her passivity of expression. Yet she had already, with characteristic rapidity, taken mental measure of Lord Martyn's new *protégée*.

"That's the strength of it." Martyn spoke quickly and in English. "You'll be interested, Eve. The girl's a savage. She is coarse and ignorant, and hasn't a vestige of moral sense. But it won't be long before London echoes with her name. She is going to be the pioneer of Retrogression. We're all a bit over-civilised and are getting tired of it. We want a touch of primitive brutality. Society has been looking for something fresh to shock and delight it. Well, here we have the very thing—Zélie!"

Eve de Freyne's shoulders quivered a little, though her lips hardly relaxed. This was an indication, however, that she was amused. Lord Martyn's utter cynicism always pleased her, for like him, she knew the world and had learnt to make mock of it.

"All right," she said curtly. "I'm willing. And there's no reason why your *protégée* should stay at the hotel to-night. She can come straight home with me. We'll send for her things in the morning."

"That will be much the best plan," agreed Martyn with an appreciative nod. "I can send you back in my brougham—unless you've got your own out. It can pick me up at the club later on." He glanced across the table at Aldis. "Steven is fixed up for the rest of the evening," he added.

"Thank you," responded Mme. de Freyne, "let it be your brougham. Cecily and I came in a taxi. She

called round for me after she had waited the best part of an hour for that faithless swain of her. She was almost in tears. I suggested dining here—to buck her up a bit." The shoulders quivered again. "I didn't anticipate this pleasant meeting. Say"—Eve de Freyne professed to have American blood in her, and occasionally spoke with a marked twang—"he was playing it up pretty thick—your Steve—as we came down the stairs? I've always warned Cecily not to take him too seriously. But she's lost her head over him—worse luck for her."

Martyn shrugged his broad shoulders. "If any man should be able to take care of hiself it's Steve Aldis. It's his own look-out if he gets bitten—he knows what he's doing. But it all goes to prove Zélie's powers—and that I'm right in my estimate of her. So I look on—and am amused."

He turned to Zélie, addressing her in her own language. "Listen, my dear," he said. "Mme. de Freyne has very kindly offered you the hospitality of her flat while you are in London. You needn't even go back to the hotel to-night. It will be nicer for you, stranger to London as you are, to have a companion. And Mme. Eve can put you up to the ropes. She speaks French like a native—her husband was a fellow-countryman of yours, you see. Now, I suggest that you two ladies have a little chat together, and I expect it won't take you many minutes to fix everything up."

The necessary shifting of seats followed this suggestion, and Mme. de Freyne and Zélie were soon in intimate converse. The journalist possessed the quality, when she cared to exert it, of gaining people's confidence, and Zélie, naturally suspicious of her own sex, succumbed sooner than might have been expected.

She expressed herself happy to fall in with the arrangements that had been made for her.

Supper parties were beginning to assemble before the little company thought of breaking up. The restaurant, almost deserted for the last hour, was filling up again. Once more Zélie realised the scrutiny of curious eyes—though it was Cecily Cuthbert, the well-known beauty, who attracted attention in the first instance. Still, it was upon Zélie that regard lingered most persistently.

"Who the devil is that girl at the table with Stephen Aldis?" Martyn, leaning back in his chair and still smoking a black cigar, caught the words distinctly.

"I haven't an idea," was the answer, "but you may well invoke the devil, old chap. I never saw such a wicked-looking little baggage in my life. There's something about her—I believe it's sheer ugliness—that—well, I've not been able to take my eyes off her for the last ten minutes."

Martyn smiled to himself, well pleased.

They rose at last and trooped out to the vestibule where the men busied themselves helping the ladies with their cloaks. Cecily Cuthbert kept very near to Aldis; she had succeeded in monopolising him ever since her advent upon the scene, and Aldis was too good-natured and easy-going to allow her to realise how much he wanted to resume his interrupted *badinage* with Zélie.

There were times, he told himself now, when even Cecily Cuthbert was capable of boring him.

But he had promised to see her home—she lived in a little house at South Kensington with a fellow actress—and, of course, he must keep his word. He seized the opportunity, however, when Mme. de Freyne

was bidding Cecily good-night, to speak a few hurried words to Zélie.

He held the small sinewy white hand which she extended to him a little longer than was necessary. "So you are going to stay with our journalist friend?" he said in low tones. "Well, she's a good sort, and you couldn't be in better hands. But you must let me come and see you. I'm interested in you, you know. I agree with Martyn that you are going to take London by storm."

He lowered his voice almost to a whisper. "May I come—to-morrow?"

Zélie gave a quick assent, her eyes dancing and flashing their strange green light upon him. "Come when you like—as often as you like," she said, without any attempt to modify her tone. *"Pourquoi non?"* She broke into a laugh of sheer delight and excitement, a laugh that was inspired by the glamour and intoxication of the moment. "I like you, *mon ami,* I like you all. And your London—ah, I am glad that I came to your London. For now I am going to live —to live!" She clapped her hands together; for the moment she was like a child.

Stephen Aldis laughed back and was about to whisper a further remark; then, hearing his name pronounced, he turned quickly away.

Cecily Cuthbert was regarding him with sombre eyes.

CHAPTER X

"I HOPE we shall be friends—the best of friends," said Eve de Freyne, as she drew her cloak closer about her shoulders, which were heavy and fleshy, and settled herself comfortably against the soft cushions of the car.

The last adieux had been said, the final arrangements for meeting at Chamney made, and Zélie was now on her way to her new, if temporary, home. Her heart was still beating quickly with excitement and elation of spirits. For she felt that she had crossed the threshold of a new and wonderful world.

"I never had a woman friend in all my life," she said naïvely, then she corrected herself sharply: *"Tiens,* yes, there was Nanon l'Escargot—that's what we called her because she had a hump on her back. Nanon was good to me when I was a brat of a girl. She saw me dancing in the street to the music of an old fiddle—it was Père Requin who played it. I hadn't had a scrap of food that day, but I could dance, I could always dance. Nanon fed me and I stayed with her—" Zélie broke off her story with some abruptness "—oh, for some months."

"Why did you leave her?" Mme. de Freyne put the question merely because she wante Zélie to continue talking.

"I got tired—and ran away." The answer was given with a certain sullenness. "Nanon wanted to make

money off me—because I could dance. She wanted to tie me up. And then there was Chicot."

"Who was Chicot?"

Zélie gave a little toss to her head. "Oh, Chicot belonged to a *brasserie* out Belmont way. He said I was wasting myself with Nanon." Zélie neglected to mention that she had been incited by her Apache friend—the one who had first "launched" her—to rob her benefactress, who had been nearly murdered in an attempt to save the few gold pieces that she had stored away.

"I used to dance at the *brasserie* and then go round and collect sous in a shell," the girl went on, in no way ashamed of her checkered career. Owen, indeed, had always encouraged her to speak of it, amused and interested by the lurid pictures of life in low places which Zélie would draw for his benefit. "It was rather amusing and my shell was always full—silver, too—but the old men, they gave the most. They did not know how I mocked them behind their backs—the old *gredins!* But Chicot—he took all the money and he beat me—until one day I turned upon him and hit him—it was with an iron bar—his face was all over blood when he fell. And how he squealed! It made me laugh."

"A return to the primitive, indeed!" muttered Mme. de Freyne to herself. "Harry was right." Aloud she said: "What about your parents, Zélie?"

Zélie had never known her parents and said so frankly. Her very earliest recollection was of an orphanage, an asylum for unwanted children, which she had hated and run away from almost as soon as she could toddle. After that her home had been the gutter. She had been taught to beg by an old *chiffonnier.* To thieve had been natural to her. A little savage,

she had grown up without respect of man or fear of God.

Mme. de Freyne would doubtless have elicited more of Zélie's story had not the recital been unexpectedly interrupted. The motor brougham happened to be passing the Northumberland Hotel, when the elder woman, gazing out of the window, observed a crowd of people, together with several policemen, at the door. Without a moment's hesitation she tapped on the glass and told the chauffeur to stop.

"What's the matter at the Northumberland?" she inquired of a policeman who was standing near at hand.

The man appeared to recognize her and civilly lifted his hand to his helmet. "I'm afraid there's been murder done, madam," he said. "Leastwise, there's someone very badly hurt."

Mme. de Freyne's professional interest was immediately aroused. "I must get out," she exclaimed, "and inquire into this at once. The *Comet* will be glad of an early report. Do you know any particulars?" She addressed the policeman with characteristic brusqueness.

"Not much, madam," she responded. "I believe it's one of the staff who's hurt. They found a man—a thief, I guess—lurking in one of the corridors. He was just about to go into a room when he was collared. But the fellow had a knife—and used it. The alarm was given at once, only unfortunately the murderer got away. He threw down his knife and climbed out of a window, they tell me. He's probably still lurking somewhere about, for the whole thing only happened a quarter of an hour ago. We're bound to get him."

"Thank you." Mme. de Freyne slipped a coin into the man's hand. "And now I think I'll go to the hotel

and make some further inquiries. May the car wait for me here?"

The policeman shook his head. "Tell the chauffeur to turn round the corner," he said. "He won't be in the way in Bowen Street, and it will only be a few steps more for you to go."

"Right." In a few hurried words Mme. de Freyne explained the situation to Zélie. "I shan't keep you waiting long," she said. "It's professional zeal, you know."

With which and a wave of her hand the journalist hurried up to the hotel. A word to the policeman on duty was sufficient to obtain her admission.

Meanwhile the car was driven slowly round into a narrow thoroughfare at a little distance from the scene of the crime. The street was ill-lit, and to Zélie, gazing anxiously out of the window, it appeared to be a blind alley. The car halted by the curb and presently the chauffeur, taking a paper from his pocket set himself to read it.

Zélie had only dimly understood what Mme. de Freyne had said to her. A murder at the Northumberland Hotel—where she would have been staying had not other arrangements been made for her? Had she heard aright?

A vague fear came upon her. She remembered her fancy of some hours ago when she had looked out of the window and imagined she recognised Bibi. Bibi! but that was absurd. For Bibi was far away—in Paris —even if he was not still in prison. Was it time for him to be out of prison yet?

Presently a boy, who wore the livery of a page, appeared and spoke a few words to the chauffeur. The latter dismounted, and, opening the door of the brougham, addressed himself to Zélie. Of course, he

spoke in English, and she did not understand what he said. But since he was evidently asking a question she nodded, and said, "Yes, please," which seemed to satisfy him, for he closed the door, and then, somewhat to her alarm, disappeared with the page, moving off in the direction of the hotel.

Zélie was left alone. She supposed it was all right, and that the chauffeur had been called away to speak to Mme. de Freyne; nevertheless, her nervousness increased.

She could not help thinking of Bibi. Had he come out of prison? The minutes passed slowly. She began a mental calculation. It was in March that he had been convicted—the end of March. Six weeks! Why, of course—suddenly she interrupted herself with a smothered scream, for the door of the brougham had been quietly—very quietly—opened upon the road side, and a white face—a face that had a smear of blood upon one cheek—was peering at her from the gloom without.

She was staring into the eyes of Bibi Coupe-vide.

CHAPTER XI

THE door of the motor brougham had swung open now to its full extent, and Zélie, craning her body forward, her fingers digging into the soft cushioned seat on either side of her, was staring, wild-eyed, at the white, ill-omened face that presented itself in the aperture.

The face with its ugly red smear upon the one cheek, with its dark hair that hung lank over the forehead, almost covering one of the eyes, with its snarling lips, with its look of a hunted beast—the face of Bibi, the Apache.

Then, in a flash, she realised that it was true—that which she had vaguely dreaded when Madame de Freyne had told her of the crime at the Northumberland Hotel. Bibi was the culprit, the man who had made his escape, and whom the police were now seeking. By some means he had traced her to the hotel, and it was for her that he was searching when he was interrupted—with such tragic results.

And now they had actually met. They were face to face—she and the man whom she had ruthlessly betrayed and sent to prison, the man who had vowed to be revenged on her.

She neither screamed nor lost her head. Zélie, at least, possessed the virtue of fierce, primitive courage. The necessity of facing dangers, of meeting attacks, had been instilled into her from her earliest years. Besides, Bibi was unarmed; had not Madame de

Freyne spoken of a knife thrown away? He was not a man possessed of any great muscular strength; all things being equal, Zélie was quite capable of holding her own against him. And, as it happened, she had the advantage. With a deft movement of her right hand she seized the dagger which was concealed in the bosom of her dress, and which she had carried ever since leaving Paris.

Bibi was as surprised as Zélie herself. He had been lurking there in some dark corner, unable to find his way out of the *impasse,* and not daring, dishevelled as he was, to venture back into the main street. The police would be upon him in a few minutes, they would drag him out to the light, and his bloodstained hands and face would betray him.

He had watched the arrival of the motor-brougham, had observed the departure of the chauffeur. Here was a woman alone—and shelter. The police would never think of seeking him in so fine a carriage. It was a case for intimidation. The woman must be compelled to lend him her aid. He would frighten her into doing so. If all turned out as he hoped he would drive quietly away from the scene of his crime—for the chauffeur was bound to return in a minute or two —and so make good his escape.

It was a desperate resolution, but he proceeded to put it into practice. And so he found—Zélie.

"Bibi!"

She uttered the name in an excited whisper. It was curious, but, of a sudden, all her desire was to save the fugitive from his pursuers. Her instinctive hatred and fear of *"La Rousse"*—as she would have called the police—came to the surface. It was one of the principles of her gutter education. And of Bibi himself she was no longer afraid.

Furthermore, at that moment a couple of policemen had appeared at the corner of the street. Presently they were joined by a sergeant. There was no time to be lost. She stretched out a hand and, clutching Bibi by the sleeve of his coat, dragged him into the carriage.

He fell on the seat by her side, staring vacantly and muttering under his breath. It was she who closed the door of the brougham, drawing it to with a smart click. Then she turned and looked at him, still holding her knife under her hand, but sufficiently exposed for him to see it. He was hatless, his clothes were mud-bespattered, and she noticed that he had cut his hands—doubtless when escaping from the window—which accounted at once for the blood upon his cheek. He presented a pitiable appearance.

"You're in a pretty state, my poor Bibi," she said, with more than a suggestion of contempt. "So you've been sticking your knife into someone and got the police on your track? What did you do it for?"

"You know well enough," he retorted. "I came to London to find you. You were at that hotel. I saw you go in. I made some inquiry. Madame Mayne—you called yourself, Madame Mayne! I saw red. I hid myself in an empty room—no one interfered with me when I went upstairs. And when everything was dark and quiet I crept out. My hand was on the knob of your door when that pig laid his hand on my arm." The Apache ground his teeth together. "I settled him with one blow, but he screamed out, and then they all came running. I had to run, too."

She laid her hand upon his arm. "Did you want to put the knife into me, Bibi?"

He turned sombre eyes upon her. "Into him—perhaps you too, if you resisted. I meant to take you

back—back to Paris with me. I'd have beaten you till you cried for mercy. You are mine, and I've the right." With a quick movement he seized her hand and threw back her sleeve—as he had done once before in Paris. "What's that upon your arm?" he cried hoarsely, pointing to the tattoo mark. "You are mine, you belong to Bibi for life. Deny it if you can. And I want you. Don't you understand that? I have you in my blood."

His fingers, with their sharp nails, dug into the soft flesh of her arm. To her the sensation was not unpleasant. Brutality was second nature to her. She knew that what he said was true. If he could carry her off now—if she should consent to go back to him—he would take the first opportunity to beat her till she fainted, to kick her as she lay at his mercy. It would be a duty. Nevertheless, he loved her; he "had her in the blood."

Suddenly she put her finger to her lips. "Hush!"

The police were parading the street, scrutinising every area, exploring every dark entry. Had Bibi remained where he had been for another five minutes he would inevitably have been discovered. As it was, the smart brougham, wherein was seated a lady in evening dress, did not present itself as an object of suspicion, and though the searchers passed close to it, even glanced through the shut window, they went on without deeming a nearer inspection necessary. Probably they argued that something had gone wrong with the motor and that a wait in this quiet street was inevitable. The absence of the chauffeur only lent colour to this idea.

Zélie had spread out her skirt, and Bibi crouching in his corner of the carriage, was almost hidden from view. The danger was over for the present, but an-

other would arise very shortly. The chauffeur was bound to return, alone or with Madame de Freyne. There was no time to be lost.

"You don't want to give me up to the police?" muttered the man. "You could have got rid of me that way—for the second time. They'd have sent me to the gallows—and there'd have been an end of it. But I'd have strangled the life out of you first—if I could." He added the last words savagely, staring down at his bleeding fingers and glancing askance at the knife, which Zélie had placed on the seat by her side, within easy reach of her hand.

"You may put the knife away," he went on, in the same tone. "I'm not going to hurt you. I want to get out of this with a whole skin. In a few minutes I may go." He turned sharply. "Where is he?" He laid strong accent upon the pronoun, supplementing it with a lurid expletive.

Zélie laughed musically. "Owen Mayne?" she queried. Then she shrugged her shoulders. "Owen" —she still pronounced the name "O-en"—"Owen Mayne is a brute. I hate him."

She understood the man with whom she had to deal, understood him thoroughly. Bibi Coupe-vide, following the instincts of his class, was only jealous of her love—as he realised the meaning of the term. He did not mind what escapades she might be up to as long as her heart remained his and his pocket was well lined in consequence. To do her justice, she had evinced small inclination for fresh adventures since placing herself in the hands of Bibi, her earnings as a dancer being quite sufficient to keep him in the idleness that was dear to his heart.

And now, quite suddenly, Zélie saw her way to turn this meeting, which at first had seemed so terrifying,

to her advantage. She could have her revenge without herself incurring any danger. The weapon should be wielded by another hand, but it would strike as surely and perhaps more swiftly.

Bibi would no longer be angry with her if he thought she did not love the Englishman, while it was in her power to inflame his wrath against the latter, by judicious lying, to a pitch of fury. Furthermore, she could play upon Bibi's cupidity. He was one of those who would commit any crime for money.

As far as Owen was concerned she had no remorse. She had set out for England, knife in hand, to revenge herself upon him.

She felt she hated him with a bitter hatred. Had she ever loved him? Had she ever loved anyone? She only knew that she loved herself best of all, and that she would willingly sweep all the world aside for her own advancement.

And so Bibi Coupe-vide, whose hands were already red, might be turned to excellent account. If the police should secure him before he had time to do as she desired, well, then it could not be helped—at any rate, he would be out of her way.

"Bibi," she said; "listen to me, *mon gars.* We must say what has to be said quickly, because my friends may return at any moment, and you must not be seen with me. You wonder that I say I hate this Owen Mayne. I do. I never cared for him. It was merely a little bit of fun, a lark—a madness of Carnival night. I have wanted you, my Bibi, all the while."

He laid his hands upon her bare shoulders and turned her so that she directly faced him. She met his eyes without flinching.

"Is this true?"

"True, I swear it. You are my adored Bibi."

"You gave me up that night. It was you who set the police after me."

"No, no," she lied, breathing hard, her bosom palpitating under the black corsage. "It was not on purpose. You thought so, but you were in error. I was frightened, for you. I thought another followed behind you, and I screamed. I could have bitten off my tongue, but it was too late. And then the next day —and the next day—and the day after that—came this Englishman. He pestered me to sit to him. At last I consented. I thought you would never forgive me and that I had lost you. But I never loved Owen Mayne—never. And at last I left him, left him of my own accord. For I had made other friends, you see, here in London. Big people, Bibi, rich and powerful. They say I can dance, that I will make money, heaps and heaps of money. You shall have your share, *mon ami*. But this Owen Mayne—he will not leave me alone. He says that I shall not dance—he wishes to keep me to himself. Ah, my dear, you can help me. You would have killed the Englishman and beaten me. You have no longer need to beat me who love you, but you can still kill."

Zélie poured out her lies with astonishing rapidity. Her voice was soft and endearing, and she had the subtle movements of a cat.

Bibi looked at his blood-stained hands. "And if I should escape from this mess," he asked slowly, "and should do as you wish, what do I get for it?"

Zélie had taken a lace handkerchief from her pocket and, after pouring a few drops of scent upon it from a tiny flagon, was rubbing the stain from the man's cheek.

"Will you come back to me—to your Bibi?" he asked grimly.

She was brushing back the hair from his forehead now, smoothing and tidying it, while at the same time she kept anxious glance upon the window lest danger should come in sight at the end of the street.

"Not yet, my Bibi," she murmured, in pouring, cajoling tone. "You must not ask that of me—for both our sakes. For look you, I am going to make much money—London is going to ring with my name. They have told me so, my new friends. There is a *Milor,* Bibi—a man of consequence. But I shall not forget you—no. Your pockets shall be full of gold. Think of that, and what you will do with it—at Montmartre. And one day I will come to you——" she laughed—"together we will go back to the old life. It will be like the old times. *N'est-ce pas?* For we shall be rich, and how we shall be envied!"

The narrow eyes of the man glittered covetously. "You swear to me that this is true, Zélie?" he muttered.

She swore that it was true. She used all the arts she possessed to convince him of her sincerity. She painted a picture that made the mouth of the Apache water. All this should be his, but first——

"And you will give your heart to none? Bibi shall always be first? For if you fail me in this"—he punctuated his speech with a vile oath—"I will kill you—yes—without mercy, though I lose my head for it."

She gave him the promise he required, gave it lightly, mindful only of gaining her immediate point. If Bibi executed her will he would have to flee the country, or perhaps he would be caught—what did it matter? When the day came then would be the time to reflect—not now.

"Don't I prove my love, Bibi, when I ask you to rid me of this Owen Mayne?"

"Where shall I find him?"

The question was not an easy one to answer—and time pressed. Bibi would need explanations which she at the moment was unable to give.

"Tell me an address that will find you," she said hurriedly. "I will write. There is no time to go into details."

"I'm with Alphonse Lereux," Bibi responded. "He's got a restaurant, Number 77, Conway Street, Soho." He brought out the unaccustomed syllables with difficulty. "That will find me—unless the detectives get on my track."

"They won't," Zélie said. Then she asked quickly: "Is that Alphonse the blackmailer?" She knew Alphonse Lereux by name. He had left his country for his country's good.

Bibi nodded. "Yes. He doesn't love me much, does dear Alphonse. But I have a hold on him."

"Good. Then I will write to-morrow. And now, my Bibi, you must go. But there is money for you," —she emptied her purse into his open hand—"and there will be more—plenty more. See that you don't let yourself be caught. Ah, *tiens,*" she cried suddenly, bursting into a ripple of laughter and picking up a man's cloak which had been left in the brougham, "here is disguise for you. It must be the coat of the *Milor Anglais.* This is his carriage. Take it, Bibi. Wrap it well round you. They will think you have come from a theatre. You will not be suspected."

She helped him eagerly to don the coat, tingling with impatience now to be rid of him. The garment, of course, was much too large for the thin figure of the Apache, but he did as she advised, and wrapped it closely about him. It would effectively conceal the disorder of his own clothes.

Then, as Zélie opened the door of the brougham, Bibi seized and held her in a violent embrace, throwing her lithe body back over his arm and pressing his hot mouth to her red lips. For a moment her senses reeled. She was Zélie the Snake once more—Zélie of Montmarte.

But she quickly recovered and disengaged herself. "Go," she cried hoarsely, "go quickly. Trust me, and you shall be rich—rich beyond your wildest thoughts. But there must be no mistake. You know what you have to do. Owen Mayne still demands my love. He is in our way." The words came in an intense whisper. "Kill him!—kill him!"

With which she thrust Bibi from the carriage. He hesitated a moment, one foot resting upon the step. His face appeared livid in the lamplight. But she closed the door upon him, and watched through the window as presently he drifted away to the crowded and illuminated street beyond.

Then Zélie, still breathing heavily, leant back against the soft cushions of the carriage, and composed herself for the return of Madame de Freyne. She glanced at her watch, an enamelled trinket which had been given her by Owen. It had seemed as if Bibi had been with her for hours; in reality the whole scene had been enacted in little more than fifteen minutes.

Yet in those minutes, if all went well, she had signed the death warrant of Owen Mayne. She had revenged herself for his desertion, while her own position remained secure.

She picked up the dagger which still lay by her side on the seat, and regarded it for a moment with inscrutable eyes. Then she thrust it back into the bosom of her dress.

In doing so she dislodged the rose which Lord Mar-

tyn had given her. It fell to the floor of the carriage, shedding petals in its fall. Nevertheless she gathered these together, lifting them in the palms of both hands to her lips, which, for a moment, she buried in the scented mass. Then she raised her head, smiling, and allowed the rose leaves to fall slowly, one by one, through her fingers to the floor. They lay there—like a stain of blood.

CHAPTER XII

MADAME DE FREYNE occupied a charming flat in Knightsbridge. Zélie quickly learned to make herself at home, though her manners, even after her training with Owen, still left much to be desired. Her weird beauty, however, atoned for a good deal; besides, she was quick and willing to learn, realising the importance of this for her future triumphant progress. At heart she remained a savage, as, if Lord Martyn prophesied truly, she would remain to the end.

To the journalist she presented a study of the deepest interest. Mme. de Freyne was never tired of listening to those stories, which Zélie was always ready to tell, of life in the great city. And the language! That, too, even to a woman of her experience, was a revelation.

Of Owen Mayne, save as a friend who had taken an interest in her and who had suggested that she should come to England, Zélie spoke never a word. Now, more than ever, it was to her interest to keep silence in respect to him.

She had written to Bibi according to her promise, giving him the information which she had been unable to provide with sufficient detail on the occasion of their unexpected meeting. Owen Mayne was at Selwood Manor, which was in Buckinghamshire, the seat of a Mrs. Alderson, his aunt. The nearest town was Selwood, where there was a station. Then followed such instructions as Zélie could give as to the best way for

Bibi to reach his destination. She had found it out by judicious questioning of Mme. de Freyne and by herself struggling with a time-table. She said nothing whatever about her own approaching visit to the neighbourhood. She hoped, even, that everything might be over by then.

She begged Bibi not to come to see her. Her letter was charged with illiterate protestations of affection. She renewed her promises of wealth in the future. She signed herself, "Zélie who adores you." And as she sealed the letter she screwed up her lips into an expression of half-humorous disdain.

"He will do as I tell him, my Bibi. Then the *Rousse* will get him, and I shall be free."

So far, as she was glad to know, the police had not succeeded in laying hands upon the perpetrator of the Northumberland Hotel assault—an assault which had, luckily, not proved fatal, though the victim was lying in hospital in sorry condition. The criminal was reported to have escaped in marvellous fashion, and the police were severely blamed for having allowed him to slip through their fingers.

It was assumed as certain that robbery had been the culprit's motive, and so, luckily for Zélie, no importance was attached to the fact that it was at the door of her room that the assault was committed. Mme. de Freyne, in her journalistic capacity, had not thought of associating the name of Mrs. Mayne—which Zélie had given at the hotel—with her young friend, and Zélie, upon the following morning, had driven alone to the hotel—her hostess being busy with newspaper work—to fetch her luggage. She had been congratulated upon having escaped a fright, and she had been asked certain questions by the inspector in charge of the case, to which questions she had given ready an-

swers, and she had driven off again without attracting the smallest suspicion to herself.

Eve de Freyne was very apologetic for having kept Zélie waiting so long in the brougham. She had been detained on another matter altogether, and had imagined that she might not be able to drive back with her guest to Knightsbridge after all. Her conscience was pricking her, too, about keeping Lord Martyn's carriage so long.

Under these circumstances she had sent one of the hotel messengers to the chauffeur, requesting the latter to come and receive instructions from her. She proposed telling him to drive Zélie straight to Knightsbridge, where he would have to explain to the servants —the young lady not talking English—that mademoiselle was a friend of her own and was to be shown every hospitality. She could not write all this in a note, and had therefore sent for the man himself.

As it happened, however, she was so busy when the chauffeur arrived that there had been a delay before she was able to speak to him. And when she was, at last, disengaged there seemed no longer any need for sending Zélie off by herself. And so, after a few minutes more, Mme. de Freyne made her way back to the motor, arriving there only a minute or two after the chauffeur. She had found Zélie waiting for her, apparently more than half asleep.

The only real trouble that resulted from that night's experiences was the loss of Lord Martyn's coat. He called upon the following day to inquire about it. He was certain that he had left it in the brougham, and shook his head at Mme. de Freyne's suggestion that it must have been mislaid at the restaurant. Zélie, of course, knew nothing about it, but expressed an opinion that *Milor* was wearing his coat when they arrived

at the Pallanza—yes, she could remember his removing it in the hall.

There was nothing for it but to accept this explanation, but Lord Martyn frowned and was evidently more troubled over his loss than he cared to admit. There were important papers in one of the pockets, he declared, and it was very undesirable that they should pass into other hands.

At this Zélie felt a qualm—hardly of conscience, for she was not troubled with such a possession, but of self-reproach, for if there was any man upon earth just then whom she did not desire to injure it was Lord Martyn. Besides, it was just possible that the guilt might be brought back to her, which would be very unpleasant. She reflected uneasily upon the character of Alphonse Lereux, and wondered if Bibi would have sufficient sense to keep those papers to himself.

But living in the day as she did, she soon put her fears aside. Lord Martyn was charming to her and appeared in no way to have modified his opinion as to her future success. He had called that Sunday quite unexpcetedly, owing to the worry over his cloak, and he could only spare a few minutes for his visit. But he had, it appeared, already made arrangements for Mr. Radcliffe, of the Star Theatre, to call on the Monday, so that no time should be lost in getting Zélie started upon her stage career.

"We meet again on Thursday at Chamney Castle," he said, as he took his leave. "And don't be afraid of shocking the good Society folk whom you will find there, my dear Zélie. Be natural, and then they are bound to think you are adopting a clever pose and will be suitably impressed."

Zélie didn't understand, but she nodded her head quickly several times and flashed her dark eyes at him.

Stephen Aldis came to see her that Sunday, too, and had tea at Mme. de Freyne's flat. He brought her flowers, fantastically shaped orchids, which he must have put himself to great trouble to find—especially on a Sunday. He was looking very handsome, Zélie thought, with his rather boyish face and his crisp, curly hair, but his type was too Saxon to suit her taste really, though she was amused at his thinly veiled devotion—more and more openly expressed with each visit he paid, for he did not confine himself to Sunday, but came upon Monday and Tuesday as well.

It was all a symbol of the triumphant progress that was in store for her. This man, this Stephen Aldis, was run after by all the women in London—Eve de Freyne had told her so. And now he was at her feet, she who had not sought to encourage him.

It was on the Tuesday afternoon that Zélie, who had gone to lie down before dinner—as was now her wont—was aroused by Clémentine, the French maid, who begged her to descend to the drawing-room, as there was a caller whom Mme. de Freyne would like her to meet.

Zélie got up grumbling. She hated being disturbed when she was resting. Still, it would not have been diplomatic to refuse, and besides, she was naturally curious. So she sent Clémentine back with a message that she would be down in a few minutes.

It took her rather more than that before she was satisfied with her general appearance. Her hair was uintidy, and she could not contrive, in a hurry, to redress it exactly as she wished. As she thrust hairpins into the recalcitrant black locks she muttered imprecations—in choice Montmartre—under her breath upon such late callers.

She descended at last to the drawing-room. She

entered the room with that noiseless tread that distinguished her and was so curiously feline. Mme. de Freyne was there, talking to a man whose back was turned to the door. He wore blue serge, Zélie noticed, not the conventional frock-coat of London.

Eve Freyne looked up as Zélie entered.

"Ah, here you are, my dear," she cried. "I think you know this gentleman and will be pleased to see him."

The man turned quickly but a little awkardly. He had broad, but rather rounded, shoulders, and his figure appeared familiar. When he faced her, smiling and holding out his hand, Zélie gave a little cry which might have expressed anger or alarm, but which Mme. de Freyne took for pleasure.

The visitor, unobserved, had lifted his finger to his lips, indicating caution. The warning was not lost upon Zélie, but recognition was evidently expected of her.

"Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed. "Robin! And how are you, *mon ami?"*

She touched his fingers with hers, then drew back, scanning his face with eyes that were charged with suspicion and defiance.

CHAPTER XIII

ROBIN behaved with what was, for him, remarkable tact. He gave no hint of the fact—for it was a fact —that he had traced Zélie to her present address, and that his visit at the Knightsbridge flat was solely upon her account.

Luckily he could claim acquaintance with Mme. de Freyne, whom he had met in Paris a year or so before, and whom he usually called upon when he happened to be in London. Once chatting with the journalist, it had been quite easy to lead the conversation into the required direction, and then, when Zélie was mentioned, to admit that he knew the dancing girl and would be pleased to see her again. Robin was very careful not to commit himself in any way. He was acting for his friend Owen, whose name must not be mentioned for fear of bringing about that scandal which would be so disastrous just now.

Robin had been on tenterhooks ever since he had learnt of Zélie's flight from Paris as to whether or no she had made boast of her *liaison*—as he still regarded it—with Owen. And why had she come to London at all? He could not guess her motive—though he feared it. And how on earth had it come about that she was living in the house of so well-known a woman as Eve de Freyne?

His conversation with the latter had set his mind somewhat at rest. Mme. Eve had told him unhesitatingly how Zélie had been introduced to her. She

had come to London to seek an opening on the stage, and this looked promising—almost as if Zélie had accepted her dismissal from Owen before it was actually spoken. Furthermore, Mme. de Freyne had not mentioned Owen's name once in the whole course of their talk.

Still, much remained that had to be spoken between himself and Zélie, and the glances which he now and then threw in her direction clearly betokened the fact. Zélie met his eyes on these occasions with a look of defiance which made him uneasy. He had always feared and disliked the girl—her fascination had never been able to touch him. He regarded her with the same aversion that he might have for a snake.

He hated what he had to do, but it was his duty towards his friend. And presently fortune favoured him, for Mme. de Freyne rose from her seat and announced that she had some writing which must absolutely be completed before dinner.

"But don't hurry away," she said to Robin. "I'm sure that you and Zélie would like to have a chat about Paris. For myself, I'll say good-bye."

And so they were left alone, facing each other, these two, animated, both of them, by the instinct of a struggle to come.

Zélie had risen, too, when Mme. de Freyne left the room. She remained standing, one foot resting on the fierce head of a great tawny tiger-skin rug that was stretched out in front of the hearth. The attitude suited her.

Robin closed the door behind his hostess and then approached Zélie. "I wanted to talk to you alone," he said simply.

"Yes." Her red lips curved defiantly. "You have followed me. Did he send you?"

"Owen?" Robin was standing close to Zélie now, one elbow resting on the mantelpiece. "In a way he did. I had to go to Paris—on business of my own. I left England last Sunday. It was Saturday night, Zélie, that news reached Owen of what you had done."

"What had I done?" So much had happened since Zélie left Paris that she had almost forgotten her escapade with the picture.

"'The Chamois Hunter,'" said the man sternly. "You know."

Zélie broke into a ripple of derisive laughter. "Ah—ah! It was well done. Is it not so?"

"It was a mean act and a cruel act," retorted the man warmly. "Moreover, it was infinitely foolish—as you shall learn. You knew that my friend, the man who never treated you anything but well, had sold his picture for a large sum; you knew, too, that his work was a masterpiece, the exhibition of which at the Salon was bound to bring him fame. Yet in your rage you wantonly hacked this picture to pieces."

"I did," cried Zélie, her eyes flaming. "And I'm glad of it—glad. Had he not deceived and deserted me—this man who called himself my husband? Had he not thrown me over, the cur, for a pink-cheeked schoolgirl; she of the photograph—about whom you lied to me, you and your precious friend? Yes—you lied—you lied—and deny it if you dare!"

She poured out the words tempestuously, and with such rapidity, that Robin had hardly caught their full significance.

And now he could not deny that in a measure Zélie had been deceived. It had been his own fault, too. He had been so anxious to get Owen safely away from Paris. Zélie could be told by letter afterwards—it was thus that he himself had urged. But Zélie had found

out for herself, and with lamentable results. He cursed himself inwardly for a fool who was always doing the wrong thing with the best intentions.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Look here, Zélie," he said, "it had to be, you know. Your—friendship with Owen was all very well while it lasted, but that sort of thing has to have an end. Owen's circumstances were all changed, and that is why he was compelled to leave Paris. He had to go to an aunt who is dying. She will make him her heir, but she would have had nothing to do with him if she had known."

"And he will marry the pink-cheeked schoolgirl —the little wax saint?" Zélie put the question mockingly.

Robin inclined his head. "That is what Owen's aunt desires. It is really a condition to his inheriting the property. You don't know, perhaps, that Owen had no money left when he reached England? It's true, however. He spent his last louis with you. So you see how essential it is. You see, too, the harm you did—to yourself—in destroying the picture. Owen would have been able to give you money at once——"

"Hold your tongue—with your offer of money." Zélie's voice rose scornfully, and a hectic spot of rage mounted to each cheek. "I will take no money—not a brass farthing bit—from this cad whom I could force away from his little saint—with a word—you understand me?—with a word. I have but to say——" She was about to refer to the form of civil marriage that she and Owen had gone through, but broke off suddenly. "But, no," she corrected herself, "I don't want him—I would not again be defiled by his touch. But I hate him—*grand Dieu!* how I hate him!"

She was the personification of hate as she stood

there, her white fists clenched, those two red spots burning upon her cheeks, her little sharp teeth showing between her scarlet lips. "Bibi, Bibi," she muttered under her breath, "give me my revenge—quick!"

She choked the words down and then turned fiercely upon the man. "He sent you," she asked, "to offer me money—for my silence, and that I should leave him alone?"

"I had to go to Paris," Robin replied, feeling the hatefulness of his task. "Owen could not leave—his aunt is too ill. He was angry—very angry—about the picture. But he wished to see you. I went to Versailles and found that you had left. But Mme. Lecomte gave me your address—here. I was surprised."

Zélie bit her lip. It was true that she had written to her friend, giving her London address. The action had been inspired by her pride in her new grand friends.

"So you bring me the message—from Owen?" repeated Zélie. "It is as I have said? It is his wish that I take myself out of his life?"

Once more Robin inclined his head. What was the good of beating about the bush? "He wished to make reparation to you," he said, "later on when he can afford to do so. And he has asked me to give you this letter."

He handed a sealed envelope to Zélie. She took it, crushing it in her palm.

"You will see Owen?"

"Yes—to-night."

Zélie was laughing now. Her laugh sounded horribly ominous in the man's ears. He could not help thinking that she had something in her mind to which

she would not give utterance—that her laugh veiled a threat.

"Then, M. Robin, you may tell Owen Mayne that I give him his liberty. And may he live long to enjoy the kisses of his little wax saint. You will be sure to say that?" She pronounced the words with biting emphasis. "May he live to enjoy his money and his kisses."

Robin had done what he had to do, but he left the flat in Knightsbridge with a sense of impending calamity. He was sure that Zélie had not been sincere, that she was meditating some secret blow. As he walked slowly away his heart was sore within him.

As for Zélie, no sooner had the door shut behind Robin than she took Owen's letter and tore it, unread, into tiny threads. It was with her teeth that she first rent the envelope in half. And all the while she muttered savage curses under her breath, while she called upon Bibi to be quick with the completion of his task.

She destroyed Owen's letter unread. Had she attempted to master its contents she would have learnt that Owen repudiated every word that Robin had said. In that letter he revealed to her the whole plot that he was carrying out at Selwood—how, his aunt dead and the inheritance his, he meant to break his engagement—should that engagement ever become an actuality—with the "little wax saint," and return to his Zélie, whom he adored now more than ever, and whom he freely forgave for the destruction of his picture.

He was unable to take Robin into his secret, for Robin was so stubbornly honest. So the good fellow would speak to Zélie of a separation, and all manner of other foolish things, thinking he was doing his duty by his friend, but Zélie must take no notice of this

whatever. Only she must pretend, in order that Robin should be deceived. And then it would not be long before Owen was a rich man and at liberty once more. What a good time they would have when that happy day came!

The letter was full of passionate affection. Yet it was torn up unread, and Zélie, with murder in her heart, tossed the fragments contemptuously to the back of the grate.

"Hasten, my Bibi," she muttered again and again. "Be quick and sure to strike." There was a red glow before her eyes—the lust of revenge.

CHAPTER XIV

Robin Clithero journeyed down to Buckinghamshire by a late train that evening. He had snatched a hurried dinner at the station and he was tired, dissatisfied with himself, and uneasy in his mind.

He was inclined to wish that he had not interfered in the matter of Zélie at all. It had been all his own doing, for Owen, if anything, had sought to discourage him—so he might have spared himself the unpleasant interview of that afternoon, as well as the running about in Paris, the playing at amateur detective, which had wearied him and prevented him from giving the requisite attention to his own business. He had reached Paris early on the Sunday morning, having travelled over-night, and the amount of work which he had crammed into two days was really astonishing.

It was about noon on the preceding Saturday that the news of the destruction of Owen's picture had reached Selwood Manor. It had come in the form of a telegram from Blaize, the *concierge,* which had been redirected to Owen from the Delphic Club.

Robin remembered the scene quite well. They were at lunch, himself, Owen, Lavender, and a girl friend of the latter's, Diana Ferrars, who had ridden over to spend the afternoon at the Manor. Mrs. Alderson always took her meals in her own boudoir, where she spent the best part of the day reclining on her invalid couch.

Owen had torn open the envelope, making some half-jocular apology, but an ominous change had come over his face as he read the missive. He was a man who was sometimes given to unrestrained outbursts of passion, and he looked just then as if he might be unable to hold himself in check. Rarely had Robin seen so dark a frown settle on his brow.

Of course Lavender noticed it too. Telegrams were rare events at Selwood Manor, and she had the natural instinct to associate them with evil tidings. There was deep concern, a tender sympathy, expressed upon her face—anxiety, too—but it was some moments before she ventured to ask Owen the cause of his trouble.

He was able to choke down his wrath, though it was only after an effort—palpable enough to Robin. He crushed up the telegram and thrust it away in his pocket. Then he tried to smile, but it was a poor attempt.

"There has been an accident to my picture—the 'Chamois Hunter,' you know," he said. "I'm afraid it has been utterly spoilt. It's a pity, and it means a considerable loss to me—but it was quite an accident." He seemed eager to emphasise the point.

Robin could not refrain from an exclamation of dismay. He set as much store by Owen's success as did Owen himself. He was proud of his friend's work. He had watched it as it developed under the masterful hand and had foreseen it as the picture of the year. Furthermore, he knew that its sale, already accomplished, was of the greatest importance to Owen just then.

For Owen was badly in debt, and he had handed over to Zélie practically all the money that remained to him. He was being pushed by his creditors, and he had promised to pay from the proceeds of this sale.

Now he would probably have to ask assistance from his aunt, who, so far, believed that her nephew was earning a comfortable income. Well, so Robin argued with himself, that wouldn't matter so much if Owen would only hurry up and get definitely engaged to Lavender—which was what Mrs. Alderson wanted. But they had been at Selwood Manor now for the best part of three weeks, and nothing decisive had happened. So perhaps this accident was for the best, after all—it might precipitate the desired end.

Staunch and loyal Robin! Sincerely and from the depth of his honest heart he desired to see his friend and Lavender engaged, so that there might be an end, once and for all, to that *liaison* with a dangerous woman which threatened nothing but ill as long as it lasted; also, so that Owen should take the place in life that was his due as natural heir to the Alderson estates. Robin was convinced that he would do credit to it.

And all the while Robin suffered—suffered acutely. For Lavender, now that he had met her in the flesh, appeared to him a very reincarnation of the one woman who had meant anything in his life—the girl whom he had loved and lost. She was just as gentle and as pure, and her voice thrilled him, so soft it was, so like in its intonation to that which haunted his dream. He, who had vowed never to love again, felt that all his heart was drawn to Lavender Percivale, and yet his lips were closed by the sacred seal of honour and friendship.

Lavender had given no indication of her feelings. She was naturally retiring of disposition—even a trifle shy. Robin had been afraid at first that Owen might offend her by too impetuous love-making. But, as a matter of fact, he had behaved with commendable

discretion. Perhaps Mrs. Alderson had warned him to go gently.

The truth was—though this was a secret of the man's own heart—that Owen had a vague hope that his aunt might be induced to make a will in his favour without the necessity of his becoming engaged at all. Her tenure upon life was growing daily more feeble, and she might easily recognise the danger of further delay.

That day, as soon as lunch was over, Owen showed Robin the telegram which he had received from Paris. It had been written in English in M. Blaize's best style.

"Your Salon picture has been cut to pieces—ruined. It was Mme. Zélie who did it."

Then Owen's rage blazed forth. He put no restraint upon his tongue. But, though Robin hardly noticed it at the time, his anger was directed against himself and his friend rather than against the author of the catastrophe. Why had they not admitted the whole truth to Zélie before leaving Paris? That was the cause of all the mischief. Of course, she had found it out and had used the first weapon that came to her hand to avenge herself. It was like her—what he might have expected.

"The whole truth?" faltered Robin, not understanding.

Then, even in his passion, Owen realised that he had nearly betrayed himself. "As there had to be a scene," he explained hurriedly, "we should have got it over at once. Zélie ought not to have found things out for herself. For now Heaven knows what I'm going to do. There's Carlier pressing for money—and a host of others."

"What you have to do, Owen," said Robin, simply, "is to hurry up matters here. Your aunt will sympathise over the picture and she'll put everything straight for you as soon as her own wishes are realised. As for Zélie—the vicious little devil—you are well rid of her, even at such a terrible price."

"That's all very well," grumbled Owen; "and, of course, you're right, Robin. You always are. It's an infernally aggravating characteristic of yours. But don't you see, man, that I shall have to go to Paris?"

Robin saw no necessity for such a course and said so forcibly. He had already arranged to cross the Channel that night, having some business of his own to attend to. Ever ready to devote himself to the cause of friendship, he suggested that he should hunt up Zélie and take the whole unpleasant duty upon himself.

It needed a good deal of argument, however, before Owen yielded, and then it was because he saw a certain humour in the situation which appealed to his love of the *bizarre* and eccentric. He would write a letter to Zélie, in which he would reveal the exact truth to her, telling her that he forgave her for the wanton damage she had done, and that she was the only woman upon earth whom he loved or could ever really love. He would explain his reasons for secrecy with regard to Robin, and make it quite clear to her that she must not take seriously a word of what the latter said.

And this letter it was which had been duly handed to Zélie and which she had torn up unread.

It was late that evening when Robin reached Selwood. Yet, since the night was fine and the spring air soft and balmy, he decided that it would be pleasant to walk the mile or two from the station to the Manor.

He was oppressed with a feeling of despondency and foreboding of evil to come, and he wanted to shake off these ominous thoughts.

But they were weighing upon him more heavily than ever when he turned into the long elm avenue that led to the Manor, and which was one of its greatest prides. The boughs intertwined above his head, almost completely shutting out the light of the moon, and as he walked, a little more hurriedly now, he could fancy that he heard footsteps following him.

More than once he came to a halt, turning, and trying to penetrate the darkness behind him with his eyes, and then there would come the creaking of a twig, and he could imagine that someone was crouching down among the trees close at hand, watching him from some leafy recess.

"Is anyone there?" He called the words aloud at last, stepping aside from the road on to the soft sward at a spot where the tall elms were flanked by dense bush.

There was no answer, but he could have sworn that, following his words, there came the sound of hurried, retreating steps among the bushes.

"I expect it's nothing more than a rabbit or a bird," he muttered to himself as he resumed his way. "I'm getting timid as well as morbid. This will never do."

A few minutes later he reached the Manor. Owen was waiting up for him, the rest of the household having retired to bed. Owen hurried his friend into the dining-room, where supper had been thoughfully laid for the traveller.

"Well?" inquired Owen, anxiously.

"It's all right," responded Robin, trying to adopt a cheerful manner. "I saw Zélie and told her. I can't say I had a good time. She's in London—looking out

for an engagement. She told me to say that she gives you your liberty—but she didn't say it nicely."

"Did you give her my letter?" interrupted Owen anxiously.

"Yes."

Owen breathed a sigh of relief. "That's all right," he said. The next moment he was acting his part once more. "Poor Zélie," he muttered, "so this is the end."

"And you?" asked Robin, scrutinising his friend's handsome face with some eagerness, although his limbs quivered. He was bracing himself to hear the answer he expected. "Are you and Lavender engaged?"

"Not yet," was the answer, given almost sullenly. "I've not found an opportunity to speak. My aunt has been very ill. She talked to me to-day about her will —and other matters. I've promised to speak to Lavender—to-morrow. Aunt Anne doesn't know if Lavender cares for me, and I've been afraid to risk things by being too precipitate. But we shall see—to-morrow."

Later, as he partook of some supper, Robin mentioned how he had fancied himself shadowed as he came through the park. "I'm getting awfully imaginative," he said.

But Owen looked serious. "It's curious," he remarked, meditatively, "but I had exactly the same experience this afternoon. I felt convinced that there was someone hanging about in the bushes. There have been several burglaries in the neighbourhood lately—so I'm told. Still, I expect you're right, and it was only a rabbit. Let us hope so."

CHAPTER XV

"I'm afraid we can no longer say that it's a matter of months. More likely weeks, or perhaps even days." The speaker was Dr. Murray, Mrs. Alderson's medical adviser. He had been in daily attendance since the beginning of the week.

Owen Mayne, who, although himself a guest, was acting as host, had accompanied the doctor to the door, and was standing chatting for a few moments before the latter stepped into the neat brougham that awaited him.

"It will be a sad loss to the county," Dr. Murray continued, with a shake of his head, "for there never was a better beloved woman. Her one desire is always to make people happy and to have smiling faces about her. Poor Miss Percivale—she'll feel it intensely."

"You haven't warned her, of course?" asked Owen. "It would do no good to sadden her just now."

"No," replied the doctor, "but, of course, she knows that the end cannot be long delayed. Well, good-bye; remember I can always come at the shortest notice if I am wanted." Dr. Murray stepped into the brougham, which was soon lost to sight in the long elm avenue.

Owen stood for a few moments at the door, gazing with unseeing eyes over the smooth, broad lawn that sloped down to a tiny lake and to a background of tall pines.

But his thoughts were not with the dying lady; he

was allowing his mind to wander to far-away Paris, to the warmth of his studio and to the white figure of a siren perched upon a rock, her hands entwined in the flowing meshes of her black hair.

"The witch," he muttered to himself, a frown upon his brow. "But I mustn't think of her as she appears in my unfortunate picture. That chamois hunter has hunted his last. Fool that I was, not to have told her everything at once. But I think I've made matters all right by my letter. She'll understand and will wait till I can go to her—with my pockets full of money. But fancy Zélie being in London—with Eve de Freyne of all people. However, I'm sure she'll act discreetly, and not attempt to write me or see me—as I asked her. She's clever as they make them and knows what's to her own interest."

"So you've just got to wait, my dear," he went on, after a pause, "while I play out my blackguardly game here, deceiving a charming old lady, who is on the brink of eternity, and an innocent girl, who has an uncomfortable way of making one feel ashamed of oneself. Yes, Robin was right when he said it was a low trick, and Robin will loathe me when he knows the truth. But it's all for your sake, Zélie." He clenched his fists. "I regret nothing. I'd stake my soul for you—my very soul!"

He turned on his heel and made his way slowly to the bright and sunny boudoir facing the other side of the house, where he knew he would find Mrs. Alderson, Lavender, and Robin. The girl looked up anxiously as he entered the room. She knew that he had been talking with Dr. Murray.

"Murray reports well of our patient," he lied, anxious to dissipate Lavender's fears, and knowing quite well that Mrs. Alderson had no illusions as to her condi-

tion. "He has to go to some meeting or other, or he'd not have hurried away directly after lunch."

Mrs. Alderson lay upon her sofa, the sofa upon which the greater part of her days were spent. She was very feeble and not allowed to walk much; for the last four years she had been a chronic invalid, suffering from a complicated form of heart disease, which had followed an attack of rheumatic fever.

She was small and frail, but delightful to look upon. She had silver-grey hair, always carefully dressed high on her head, hair that reminded one of nothing so much as that of some stately lady of old times. Mrs. Alderson was, in every way, like a picture, from her slender, delicate figure to her smooth, white brow and clear-cut features.

She smiled now as Owen crossed to Lavender's side and stood talking in an undertone to the girl. What a handsome couple they made! It had not taken long for Owen, by his natural charm of manner, to win her heart.

"I mustn't be so cruel as to keep you two young men indoors all the afternoon," she said. "This is my quiet hour, you know, when Lavender reads to me or we chat together on all manner of things. Perhaps, Owen, you and Mr. Clithero would like to take a ride and get back in time for tea. After that I can spare Lavender to you for a little."

She cast a meaning glance at her nephew. It was evidently meant to remind him of his promise. Then, as the two men were about to take their departure, Mrs. Alderson called them back to ask a question which had just occurred to her.

"By the way, Owen," she said, "did you tell Mr. Clithero about the entertainment at Chamney to-morrow? The invitation came while you were away,"

she went on, addressing Robin. "Lavender wanted to refuse because I've not been so well, but Miss Ferrars is very anxious for her to go. There are bound to be all sorts of curious people there, and I've no doubt that you, as an artist and a Bohemian"—she smiled and shook her forefinger at him—"will be interested. Besides, both Owen and I owe a good deal to Lord Martyn, who is giving the party."

Owen laughed. "Oh, I'd forgotten all about it. But you're quite right, my dear Aunt Anne, for the entertainment is bound to be a peculiar one. Martyn is such a queer fish. But, as you say, we have every reason to be grateful to him. If it hadn't happened that he was your neighbour and that he knew of me in Paris you would probably never have found me out at all or have thought of writing to me. Yes, Martyn is a good fellow, but I'm afraid he makes rather a point of shocking people, doesn't he? I've heard some queer stories about him and his doings since I've been here." Owen's pose, in the presence of his aunt, was that of a scrupulous observer of the proprieties.

Owen and Robin took their departure after this, accepting Mrs. Alderson's suggestion of an hour's ride across the fine open country which lay in the neighbourhood of Selwood Manor.

Lavender seated herself at once by the side of the invalid and opened the book which she was in course of reading aloud. But she had not read many pages before she noticed that the old lady had closed her eyes and was sleeping peacefully, a smile upon her thin lips.

Lavender allowed the book to drop upon her knees and sat very still, her hands folded in her lap, gazing straight in front of her. A mirror upon the opposite wall reflected her beautiful face and graceful figure.

Lavender was very fair and her features were Madonna-like in their innocence and purity. Her face was oval, her eyes blue and dreamy, her lips tenderly sensitive. She might have been Mrs. Alderson's own daughter, because of the similarity of disposition between the two, as well as the great love they bore each other.

Yet it was little more than three years that Lavender had lived under the roof of Selwood Manor. She had come there before she was nineteen, and she was now nearing her twenty-second birthday.

She had not gone through life without knowing its sadder side. She was the daughter of a former vicar of Selwood. Her mother had been a great friend of Mrs. Alderson's, who had stood as Lavender's godmother.

Unfortunately, when Lavender was eleven or twelve years old, things had gone amiss with the Percivales. The vicar had become involved in certain shady financial transactions in which he had not only lost the little fortune of which he was possessed, but suffered in honour as well. He was innocent of actual offence, as all who knew him were aware, but he was technically guilty of complicity with the rogues who had defrauded him. The ruin of many besides himself was laid at his door. He had to appear in court, and, though he was absolved of personal blame, the shame of it broke him both physically and mentally.

Mrs. Alderson and her husband, who was alive at that time—a hard-riding, genial old country squire—did their best for the vicar not only out of personal sympathy but because of their affection for Mrs. Percivale and for Lavender, a delicate, pretty little creature who had won her way to their hearts. But the vicar was too proud to accept assistance from his

friends, and, with his wife and child, he had drifted away from Selwood, losing himself and them in the world against which he had not the strength to fight.

The years that followed were black and bitter, and Lavender could never think of them without a shudder. In her childish memories she always seemed to be moving from place to place, never making long sojourn anywhere. She had been to school, but had soon been removed from it because the expense was too great. Her mother had then taken her education in hand, but Mrs. Percivale was weak and sickly, and her husband was warned that unless she could be sent out of the country to a warmer climate she was not likely to survive another winter.

It was this verdict of the doctor's which brought about the final catastrophe. Whatever the late vicar's faults may have been there was no doubt about the love he bore for Lavender's mother. It was for her sake that he stepped, open-eyed this time, off the path of honesty.

One day he yielded to temptation. He stole—stole foolishly, almost without taking means to avoid detection, almost as if he were proud of what he did.

He was arrested before he had time to leave the country with his wife and child. Charged at the police court he made no attempt to deny his guilt, but pleaded that what he had done was to save a human life.

Here fate, as it will do, made cruel sport of him. For, instead of saving his wife's life, his action brought her to her death-bed. Mrs. Percivale died, and was mercifully spared the knowledge of her husband's conviction and sentence to twelve months' imprisonment.

He did not live to complete his sentence, but he held his head high till the end, refusing to acknowledge that

he had committed any sin. As for Lavender, the sensation caused by the case brought her to the notice of Mrs. Alderson, now a widow, who came forward and offered to adopt the unfortunate felon's daughter.

And now the end was drawing very near; Mrs. Alderson had made no secret of it with the girl. But she was not afraid of going as long as she was assured that she was leaving Lavender happy.

Was Lavender disposed to return the love which Owen had declared himself ready to bestow? That was the question which harassed the mind of the dying woman. She had been waiting, watching—allowing matters to follow their normal development. Did Lavender care?

Mrs. Alderson opened her eyes dreamily. Lavender was still sitting upright in her chair, the open book lying idly upon her knees. Her thoughts were evidently far away. She had not noticed that Mrs. Alderson was awake.

There was a smile hovering about her lips, and presently she murmured a question to herself, murmured it aloud.

"Does he love me? Oh, I wonder if he really loves me?"

Mrs. Alderson heard, and then she drew a deep breath, a sigh of thanksgiving. "I have asked no more of God than this," she whispered, "that you should love one another. And God has granted my prayer."

"Oh, mother, I didn't know you were awake." Lavender fluttered to her feet, tumbling the book to the floor, and then, a rich flush mantling her cheeks, stooped to pick it up.

"Yes, dear, I was awake, and I overheard what you

said. Wasn't it indiscreet? But come, my darling, come and sit down by my side again."

"Yes, mother. Shall I go on reading to you?" Lavender fumbled with the pages of the book, bending over it to hide her blush.

Mrs. Alderson stretched out her hand and rested it upon that of the girl. "No, Lavender, I don't want to be read to," she said softly. "I'd like you to talk to me—of him. I'm sure you'll be happy to share your secret with me."

Lavender gave a little fluttering sigh, and then yielded herself to the delight of talking of her love. She could not say when the knowledge of it had first come to her, but she was quite sure that she had known Owen long before he ever came to Selwood Manor—she had seen him in her dreams, he had been the fairy prince of the fairy castle that all girls build for themselves.

"But do you think he cares for me as I care for him, mother?" she murmured. "That's what I'm not sure about. You see, he hasn't said a word to me yet, and sometimes I can't help feeling that I'm not good enough for him, I, who, if it had not been for your kindness, might have been in the workhouse by now—I"—she lowered her eyes—"whose father died in prison. Does he know all these things about me, mother? Oh, you've told him the truth, haven't you?"

"Yes, Owen knows your story," Mrs. Alderson comforted. "I have told him every word of it. He said that he was sure your father was more sinned against than sinning."

"Ah, that was good of him, good and kind," sighed the girl, reassured. "And he's so handsome. I'm sure he has just the face of a really great artist. Don't you think he's very handsome, dear?"

"His mother, my sister Margaret, was a beautiful woman," Mrs. Alderson said, "and Owen is like his mother. I recognised the likeness immediately, and it made the boy very dear to me. For I loved my sister, Lavender, and the fact that she and I were estranged from each other troubled me more than I can tell you. I don't think I've ever spoken to you of our quarrel—it is a subject that I have not cared to allude to."

Mrs. Alderson pressed her hand to her brow for an instant, then continued: "You see, Margaret and I had always been on the best of terms together, but when I married her manner changed, and though I begged her to tell me why she would never say a word. She thought I knew, that I understood, but I didn't. It was all a mystery to me. And then she went abroad, and from France, where she was living, wrote me a hard and cruel letter in which she said that she hoped never to see me again. She married in France and had one child—that is Owen—whose birth cost her her life. They were in Paris then, for Mr. Mayne had French relations. But I learned that the father and the boy drifted away soon afterwards, and Owen might have passed out of my life altogether had I not accidentally heard of him through Lord Martyn."

The old lady paused and sighed. "It was only after my husband's death," she went on, "that I discovered the reason for my sister's anger. She, too, had been in love with Francis—before he married me—and imagined that I had weaned his affections from her. I'm afraid he must have given her some excuse for believing that he cared—that is, if I can judge from the letters which I found." Two bright spots of colour came to the old lady's cheeks as she spoke.

"So you see," she resumed, "from the time of my marriage till her death Margaret imagined that I had

wilfully robbed her of the man she loved. She died believing me a cruel, heartless woman, and that is the tragedy of it, for I loved my sister dearly. That's the story, Lavender, and now you know why I was so eager to see Owen before I died, why I wanted to make up to him for the pain that his mother suffered on my account. And it is my one remaining wish that he and you, my two dear children, shall fall in love with each other, so that Selwood, with all its responsibilities, may be left in capable hands."

"And now kiss me, dear child," the old lady concluded, "for since you love Owen everything will be well. God has granted my wish."

Lavender bent and kissed the smooth brow of the old lady. "Oh, I should be so happy," she murmured, "if I was sure that Owen cared for me as I care for him. But sometimes—I don't know how to explain it —I'm almost afraid."

Mrs. Alderson stroked Lavender's hair lovingly as the girl bent over her. "When we are in love we are frightened of shadows," she comforted. "I dare say you are right, and that Owen was thinking of those unhappy days that you lived through, my child. He was so sorry for you when I told him of them. So there, I don't think you need worry yourself any more about it."

Mrs. Alderson's couch was drawn up close to the window, a window that looked out upon a carefully tended flower garden, with a blackground of wood and undulating hills. The afternoon sun was streaming in, shimmering on Lavender's fair face. The old lady lifted herself a little and gazed into the garden.

"If I'm not very much mistaken," she said, "our two young friends have come back from their ride, and are strolling about in the garden at this very moment.

I suppose they're afraid of intruding before the tea hour. If I were you, Lavender dear, I'd join them. Send Mr. Clithero in to have a chat with me. I like Mr. Clithero—there's a solid honesty about him which appeals, and, besides, he's so devoted to Owen."

Lavender needed no second invitation. She fluttered to the window, watching for herself the two tall figures sauntering up the garden path, then, smiling and whispering tender words, she again kissed the old lady and ran lightly from the room.

CHAPTER XVI

"WHAT'S wrong with you, old chap? You've been awfully glum all day—not a bit yourself. Haven't I been behaving to your satisfaction?"

Owen Mayne put the question with that half-satirical touch in his voice which was rarely absent in his dealings with Robin. The two young men were strolling in the garden and smoking, waiting for the gong that would summon them in to tea.

"I? Oh, I'm all rght," responded Robin, but somewhat evasively. "Don't worry about me, Owen. I was really thinking that it wasn't much good my having come back to Selwood. I'm only in the way here, after all. There's nothing more that I can do. You're quit of Zélie—at least, I hope so—and you've only got to go ahead and make Lavender your wife, and the sooner the better. I believe you are really growing to care for the little Puritan—as you called her. And as for her—she adores the very ground you walk on. I'm sure of it, in spite of your doubts. It's all falling out just as it should—and I—I'm delighted. You are clear of a ghastly encumbrance, you'll settle down as master of a big estate, you'll be rich and have a charming wife——Jove, Owen, but you are a man to be envied! I shall go back to France happy on your account—and hers—oh, quite happy."

He spoke heartily, and yet there was something

strained and unnatural in his voice. Owen glanced at him curiously.

"So you're really glad, Robin?" he asked. "You're not sorry you refused the offer I made you? Do you remember—that you should take my place?"

Robin shook his head with decision. "No, no," he said, "never that. I should have hated, loathed myself. I don't think you meant it seriously—you couldn't have."

Owen shrugged his shoulders. "Well, well," he said, "what had to be—had to be. You've been a very good friend to me, Rob, and I'm grateful. You'll remember that, won't you, old chap, whatever happens in the future? Do you know, there are times"—his eyes were reflective—"times when I wish that we could cut the last four months out of our lives altogether."

He slashed at the grass by the side of the path with a twig which he had picked up. "They were jolly days, weren't they," he muttered; "the irresponsible studio days when nothing mattered?"

"There are better things in store for you, old fellow," responded Robin sturdily. "You've drawn a lucky number in the lottery. Stick to it. As for me, I shall get along all right at Fontainebleau—with my work."

He broke off, because at that moment Lavender appeared, a graceful figure in white, running across the lawn from the house. A moment or two later she was by their side.

She delivered her message breathlessly. Mrs. Alderson wanted a chat with Mr. Clithero. There was nothing strange in the request. The old lady could never see much company together, and it was her way to arrange pleasant little interviews one at a time.

Robin walked slowly to the house. Once he turned

and noticed that Owen and Lavender were strolling away together in the opposite direction.

"It is all as it should be," he muttered, bowing his head, "but I—oh, why must I stay here—and suffer? For I love her so—oh, I love her so!"

CHAPTER XVII

In the meanwhile Owen and Lavender wandered off together, their feet turning, as it were instinctively, towards a spot in the garden which for many years past had gone by the name of "The Lovers' Walk."

This was really a long cutting in the wood which bordered one side of the garden, and Lavender delighted in the spot, especially in the spring, because of the wild flowers with which it abounded. The soft, mossy turf was always carpeted then with primroses, hyacinths, bluebells, and violets. There was a little silvery brook, too, that flowed murmuring through the dell.

At the far end of the walk, almost hidden by tree and bush, there was a life-sized marble statue of a girl in loose, flowing robes. The strange thing about it was that no one could say when or by whom the effigy had been set up. There was no mention of it in the family records. But though nothing was actually known, it was, naturally enough, believed that the figure had been set up to commemorate a bygone tragedy.

The expression of the face, the attitude, all lent colour to this belief. The figure was represented standing, with arms raised, and leaning a little forward as if suddenly arrested by the sight of something that terrified. The lips were slightly parted, the eyes turned down with a look of fear in them that haunted. It was a sweet face, very delicate and classical, and, altogether, the statue was a fine piece of work.

Nevertheless, Lavender was glad that it was so overgrown with shrub as to be hardly visible till one came quite near, only peeping out then like a wan ghost from among a festoon of leafy branches, for it seemed to her that the statue brought a discordant element, a suggestion of pain, into a spot that was idyllic in its beauty.

And so they approached the "Lovers' Walk," Owen and Lavender, walking slowly side by side, not talking much as they went, for the mind of each was busy with its own reflections.

The girl was very happy, timidly, deliciously expectant. Owen cared for her—she was sure of that now; it was silly of her, she told herself, to have had any doubt of it. Mrs. Alderson had quite set her mind at rest. It was all clear, even from what Owen had whispered to her when Mr. Clithero had turned away, leaving them to their own company.

"Lavender, I'm glad of the opportunity of a chat with you. There's something I want to say."

Her cheeks had flushed pink—she never could help that tell-tale blush!—but she had tried to look unconscious as she murmured, "Yes, Owen," then, casting down her eyes, "Which way shall we go?"

"To the Lovers' Walk," he had replied promptly, looking down into her face, a smile upon his lips.

"Oh, yes—we will gather primroses," she had cried, clapping her hands together. "I want some for the vases in the boudoir. Mother loves the spring flowers."

"Sweet simplicity," muttered Owen to himself, pursing his lips together, but he drew her hand gently under his arm, and so they made their way in silence to the spot which he had chosen, the spot where he had decided that the fateful words must be spoken.

For what was the use of further delay? Lavender

loved him and was ready to give him her young and fragrant life. But, all unexpectedly, conscience had pricked him, some belated appreciation of the sin he had so easily, so lightly designed. This was not remarkable, for Owen was thoughtless and irresponsible rather than flagrantly unscrupulous.

It had seemed so easy and simple—at a distance.

It was an afternoon for love vows. The long cutting in the wood was fragrant with the scent of spring. The path by the brook was in shade, but the leafy branches of the trees glittered as if they were spangled with thousands of gems as the sunrays filtered through. The stream made soft, murmuring music, an accompaniment to the twittering of birds among the boughs.

Lavender had soon gathered a handful of pale, dewy primroses. Owen watched her as she ran from tuft to tuft, her feet sinking in the soft moss. Her white dress and her fair hair, only partly hidden by her sunbonnet, were in delightful harmony with the dark green background. Owen's artistic eyes appreciated the scene. Like Zélie, Lavender was slim of figure, though she had nothing of the feline—the almost serpentine—litheness that characterised the French girl.

But Zélie would have been out of place in the spring freshness of the wood—she would have presented an element of discord. Not that that would have been an offence in the eyes of Owen, to whom strong discords and startling unconventionalities appealed; indeed, even now, he was figuring Zélie in Lavender's place—Zélie, black clad, a panther among buttercups and daisies! What a fine contrast!

"Are they not beautiful?" Lavender came to him, holding up the flowers for his inspection. But he caught her hands and drew her to him, so that, with

a little cry, her fingers relaxed and the primroses fell, a shower of gold, to her feet.

"You are beautiful," he said; "you are the sweetest flower of all—my flower. I love you, Lavender."

They were spoken, the fateful words, born of deceit and selfishness—the burning, lying words that could never be unsaid or forgotten.

Lavender drew a deep sighing breath, and allowed her head to drop against the man's shoulder. He could feel the fluttering of her breast, the beating of her heart—the heart with which he was playing so cruelly.

For the day was not very far distant when that heart would bleed for the insidious blow which he was dealing now, a blow that was veiled with a kiss. And he did not attempt to disguise the truth from himself. He knew that he was a blackguard.

"You will be my wife, Lavender?" he whispered hoarsely. "Oh, my dear——" he lifted her head and gazed down into her pure blue eyes—"you need not speak a word—not a syllable—if I have frightened you—let a kiss be your answer."

Slowly he bent his head still lower, his arm holding her tightly to him. And so their lips met.

And all the while in the ears of the man the water of the brook flowing at his feet was singing a monotonous chant. "He betrayed with a kiss—he betrayed with a kiss—with a kiss—with a kiss—with a kiss." And the birds chirped mockingly to the refrain, while the wind whispered it to the trees.

But the brook was singing to Lavender too—a glad song, the song of love exultant, while the very beating of her heart seemed pulsed back to her by nature that rejoiced for her rejoicing.

The moments sped by—moments that were precious to the girl in her new-found earthly paradise, moments

that for the man were charged with a weight of self-reproach of which he had not deemed himself capable.

For Lavender had touched some chord in his nature, of the very existence of which he was not aware. He did not love her, for love such as was her right, such as alone might be offered to her, was a stranger to his breast. But vaguely the very purity of her love had affected and moved him, reaching to some unprobed depth of his being, and for the moment he hated and despised himself.

They strolled on by the brook, forgetting that the hour grew late, and that tea at the Manor must long ago have been served. And, after a while, Owen crushed down the voice of conscience within him, letting himself go with the sheer delight of having this beautiful young creature by his side palpitating with love for him, bashfully happy to lift her sweet lips, untasted till now, to meet the ardour of his kisses.

At last, the world forgetting, they reached the point where the Lovers' Walk came to an abrupt termination in the thickness of the wood. And here the glint of white among the bushes and undergrowth suddenly caught Owen's eyes. He knew of the existence of the statue, but had never had the curiosity to examine it closely.

Now, before the girl had time to realise what he was about to do, Owen seized a branch and drew it aside, laughingly remarking that they must have a look at the guardian spirit of the grove.

Lavender gave a little scream as she found herself gazing at the white, sad figure that seemed to be looking down upon them, a wan ghost of disappointed love.

"Oh, Owen," she cried, with a shudder, "I didn't know what you were going to do. Haven't you heard

that there's a superstition about this statue?" She gently released his fingers from the bough, allowing it to sway back. "Let us go away, dear; oh, please, please, let us go away."

He laughed at her fears, himself not addicted to superstitious prejudices. He wound his arm about her, drawing her to him, but, at the same time, turning so that they no longer faced the offending statue.

"What silly fancies!" he scolded. "As if a statue could do any harm! But tell me, darling, what is it they say?"

"They say," she answered, nestling to him, "that if lovers who have just plighted their troth—as we have done, Owen—should look together upon the statue some evil will befall them. That's why the bushes have been allowed to grow up all around it—it has been buried in foliage for years and years, longer than anyone can remember. Oh, Owen, it's only a silly story, isn't it? You don't believe in omens of that sort?"

"Of course I don't," he replied, with a laugh that, nevertheless, sounded a little strained. For the coincidence was, at least, peculiar. Did not evil already threaten?

"You see," Lavender went on, "the story goes that the lovers who gave their name to this place loved only for a while. It was he that failed. But she never knew—she was true and faithful to the end."

"What was the end?" Owen put the question with assumed carelessness.

"He was found lying in the wood—dead. He had been slain in a duel. She found his body. That is what you see in the statue. The poor girl is looking down at her dead lover lying at her feet. It's such a sad, pathetic little story, but, oh, Owen, don't let's

think of it now. It seems to me suddenly as if the sun had gone and the wood is dark and cold."

He led her away, chiding gently. But for him, too, the glamour of the day was done. Once more, as they followed the path by the stream, there was the echo of a torturing refrain in his ears—nor could he close them against it.

"He betrayed with a kiss—with a kiss—with a kiss."

And as he walked he turned his head to the spot where a white glimmer among the trees betokened the presence of the ill-omened statue. He could see the figure in his mind's eye, bending forward, her eyes horror-filled, gazing down at the body of her dead lover—the lover whose love had failed.

CHAPTER XVIII

"HAVE you any news of the lost papers, Harry?" Stephen Aldis put the question in a tone that was marked by more than a little anxiety. It was the first time since his arrival at Chamney Castle that Thursday morning—the day of the great entertainment—that he had been able to have a word alone with his host.

He had originally intended to journey down to Buckinghamshire the day before, accompanying Mme. de Freyne, Zélie, Cecily Cuthbert, and one or two more of Lord Martyn's guests, for whom special carriages had been reserved, but at the last minute he had been obliged by important business to delay his departure. This had annoyed him not a little, for he had been looking forward to an afternoon and evening in the company of the French dancing-girl, who had captivated him so suddenly and so strangely.

Poor Cecily had been almost ruthlessly thrust aside, and she was quite conscious of the fact. Aldis, accustomed as he was to being made much of by the other sex, had grown careless of the finer feelings of those women with whom he had episodes of affection or passion; with him the old love was very easily put by, the new as easily assumed.

His flirtations had all been so ephemeral and were of such small account to him; he could not see why they should mean more to the other party concerned.

It was true that with Cecily he had allowed matters

to go rather further than usual. There had been that suggestion of marriage. It was not he who had made it, but he had never taken the trouble to deny the rumour. He had, indeed, considered the feasibility of such an event. But that was before he met Zélie.

He was very fond of Cecily—no less fond of her now than before he knew the French girl. He certainly had no intention of marrying the latter, for she repelled him even while she attracted him so powerfully. Well, why should Cecily object to an interlude of the sort? It really meant nothing, and if Cecily were wise she would not worry her head about it. She could win him back quite easily later on, if she were not foolish enough to give way to jealousy. That was the one thing he could not bear—jealousy.

He had done his best to hint as much to Cecily, and because she was very quiet over it with him and did not make a scene he was happily under the impression that she understood. All was shaping itself as he desired.

But he did not see Cecily at those times when she allowed her real feelings to come to the surface. He did not know of the long sleepless nights and the pillow bedewed with tears, nor did he notice the pallor of her cheeks, because she understood so well the use of cosmetics.

It was her nature to hide her true self from the man she loved. Upon the surface she was the shallow, light-hearted, laughing star of musical comedy that the world took her for, but below this there were unprobed depths of sentiment, smouldering fires that might at any moment burst forth to active life. Cecily was hardly conscious of them herself, save for the dull ache in her breast when she realised that love had proved unkind.

Lord Martyn had just contrived to snatch a few moments to have a chat with his friend. They were strolling together on the great sunny terrace of the castle when Aldis put his question.

"Have you any news of the lost papers, Harry?"

Lord Martyn shook his head gravely. "I'm sorry, Steve, old man, no."

Aldis knitted his brow. "Dash it!" he muttered. "I'd give a hundred pounds, Harry—five hundred—for this not to have happened. And it was all my own idiotic fault."

"It was," agreed Martyn, who always spoke his mind frankly when occasion demanded. "What on earth possessed you to put those letters into the pocket of my coat is beyond my comprehension."

"How could I guess the coat would be stolen?" protested Aldis. Nevertheless, he hung his head a trifle. "It was a mean thing ever to have wanted you to see the letters of that poor little girl at all," he went on, "and I'm ashamed of myself—I really am."

"That's because you're in a fix," said Martyn cynically, "and don't know what you will say to Lady Beatrice when you meet her. Your conscience wouldn't have pricked you if things hadn't gone wrong. The devil was sick—you know the old saw."

"I dare say you're right," said Aldis ruefully. "Anyway, I know I'm jolly sick with myself at the present moment. But I give you my word, Harry, I've not shown those letters to another living soul. You do believe that, don't you?"

Martyn nodded, gravely blowing a smoke ring from between his lips. He was smoking one of his invariable black cigars. "It was just your infernal vanity," he remarked.

"Not only that," Aldis flushed guiltily. "You were

so jolly confident that Lady Beatrice was the last girl in the world to commit an indiscretion. You were arguing against your own theories, and I couldn't resist the temptation to put you right with them. That's why I said I'd show you the silly letters she wrote to me years ago—when she was little more than a child. That's why I brought them round to the club that evening when we first met Zélie. You remember we sat talking in the smoking-room, and I was just about to produce them when someone else joined in the conversation. Your coat was lying by my side, so in case I didn't get another opportunity I slipped the letters into one of the pockets. I knew I could trust you. But you never knew they were there, and were not worrying about the loss of your coat till I called round in the morning to ask for the wretched things back, and then—oh, it's all a ghastly nuisance."

"It may be a good deal worse than that," commented Martyn, pursing his lips. He liked Stephen Aldis as much as he liked most men, and he never lost his temper—though it had been sorely tried in connection with this particular matter.

"Worse—how?"

"Why, we don't know that the letters have not fallen into the hands of some wretched blackmailer, who will use them against Lady Beatrice. Just now, when her name is before the public, her engagement to Sir Donald one of the events of the season, her portrait in all the papers—isn't it a marvellous opportunity for an unscrupulous man? My name and address were in one of the pockets. There's no question as to a thief in the case. I've made every inquiry, and the coat wasn't merely lost or taken by accident. Of course, I've had a detective on the scent, too, but with the usual futile result."

The two men paused, leaning over the marble balustrade. Martyn tossed away the stump of his cigar.

"You'll meet Lady Beatrice to-day, you know," he said.

"Oh, that's all right," explained Aldis hastily. "We've met many times since—since the little innocent interlude of the past. We've laughed over it, and agreed that it should all be forgotten."

"And I suppose Lady Beatrice imagines that her letters have long ago been destroyed?"

Again Aldis flushed. Lord Martyn, in his blnnt way, had touched the mark, hit his friend on the raw. For Stephen Aldis had allowed Lady Beatrice Clewer, with whom he had flirted—innocently enough—in the past, to imagine that those foolish and incriminating letters which she had written were all destroyed; whereas in his self-conceit, the vanity of a man made much of by women, he had kept them as souvenirs—trophies—of his conquest. And now this meanness, this contemptible littleness of his character, stood revealed to a man who, of all men, was the one in whose estimation Aldis wished to stand high.

For Lord Martyn professed to believe in no man's honour, and now in the person of one of his nearest friends his pessimist theory was proved correct.

"That's all right, Steve," said Martyn, breaking the ominous silence. "I quite understand. And, of course, I'll do everything I can to put matters right—if any trouble should befall."

It was upon this that the two men parted, Aldis all the more readily because at that moment he caught sight of the lithe figure of Zélie slowly making her way across the lawn to the little group under the trees. She was in the company of a man whom Aldis did not recognise, a tall, fair boy, who was bending

over her and laughing in a manner that indicated pleasant intimacy. The actor was conscious of a twinge of jealousy and hastened his steps across the soft turf of the lawn.

Meanwhile, Lord Martyn made his way back to the house and settled himself down in his study.

He was given but little leisure. He had not been in his study for more than ten minutes before his privacy was disturbed by a sedate old butler, who entered the room nervously, giving evidence by his manner of a disturbed mind.

"What's the matter, Ronaldson?" Martyn glanced up from the papers on the desk before him.

"If you please, my lord, there's a man, a foreigner, who wishes to see you. He won't give his name or state his business, but he says it's important. He don't speak English, and I had to get Mrs. Richards to interpret. I'd have packed him off, seeing that it's to-day, but did not like to without mentioning it to you. He looks a scamp, my lord."

It was Lord Martyn's habit to see anyone who asked for him. He had given strict instructions that no one was to be turned away from his door. He found the cadgers and riff-raff who appealed to him on one pretext or another an interesting study.

"You may show the fellow in, Ronaldson." Just now, with those incriminating letters still to be recovered, it was important not to miss any casual caller.

The butler began to mutter a protest, but was dismissed with a wave of the hand. Martyn resumed his inspection of the papers on his desk. Presently Ronaldson returned and ushered an ungainly figure into the room.

It was Bibi Coupe-vide. He was attired in a tweed sut of aggressive pattern and his cravat was of lurid

hue. He carried a black bowler hat, and his hands were gloved. The effect was ridiculous—Bibi, the Apache, looked out of his element. He had taken the trouble to shave clean, and his receding chin was peculiarly noticeable, as were his little furtive, twinkling eyes. His narrow shoulders were hunched, and he slouched more than ever as he followed the butler into the study.

Lord Martyn inspected his visitor with curiosity, leaning back in his chair. The fellow's face seemed familiar to him.

"You may go, Ronaldson," he said to the butler, then he addressed Bibi in his own language.

"You wish to see me?"

The Apache shuffled his feet and stared at his hat.

"Yes, milord," he mumbled. "I am glad that milord speaks French."

"Sit down."

Bibi obeyed, carefully placing his hat on the floor by his side. This big Englishman, with his strong face, penetrating eyes, and black beard, disconcerted him more than a little. He felt himself a weakling, and guessed instinctively that it would be no use to assume a hectoring tone. He had found it necessary to modify that tone a good deal since he had been in England.

"Well, what is it? I'm very busy this morning, and can only give you a minute or two." Martyn wheeled round in his chair. There was a tone of command in his voice, besides a great contempt. He knew the type of man he was dealing with.

Bibi began to wish he had not come, that he had listened to the advice of his friend Alphonse Lereux, who had had greater experience than he in these matters. Alphonse had recommended dealing exclusively with the woman—with Lady Beatrice, who was the

writer of the incriminating letters found in Lord Martyn's overcoat. It is so much easier to frighten a woman.

But Bibi had imagined himself more clever than his friend, and had decided on a double deal. Besides, he had found out that Lord Martyn lived in the neighbourhood of Selwood, where he himself had come in obedience to Zélie's commands, and was therefore easily accessible. Some ready money was urgently needed before Bibi carried out his coup against Owen Mayne, especially having regard to the necessity of immediate flight from the country, and here was the best means of obtaining it. Later on, if all went well—so the Apache argued with himself—Lady Beatrice might still be approached and made to pay for her indiscretion—he had arranged for that.

But now—well, Bibi did not feel so confident of himself. And yet the man in whose possession these letters had been would surely pay for their restoration—to save a woman's honour!

"Milord lost an overcoat in London last week." Bibi made the plunge. What was the use of holding back?

"Ah!" Lord Martyn sat erect. "Well—you found it?"

"Not I—a friend of mine. He took it by error from a restaurant."

The lie was so palpably absurd that Martyn laughed. Bibi, too, allowed his lips to relax in a grin.

"Your friend took my coat by mistake. Well, let it go at that. You wish to restore it?"

This was impossible, for it had already been pawned.

"I have not got the coat, milord," said Bibi, "but——" he hesitated, scraping his feet on the carpet.

"There were papers—letters," prompted Martyn.

"Yes, milord. I thought they might be of importance. I have brought them. I have them here." He tapped his pocket.

"All of them?"

"Yes, milord," lied Bibi. He had taken the precaution to leave two of the most incriminating letters in London.

"Well, hand them over and we'll say no more about the coat—taken by mistake."

This was a high-handed way of dealing with him which did not at all meet with Bibi's approval. "Pardon, milord," he muttered surlily, "but these letters—they are worth money—to you or to the lady or to the other gentleman—I care not which. I have come to you first. Will you buy them from me? If not, I go elsewhere."

"I see," said Martyn easily. "It is a case of blackmail. How much do you want?"

"I think—five hundred pounds," said Bibi modestly. "It is serious for the lady—if monsieur her *fiancé* should see those letters." Bibi had acquired all the necessary information about Lady Beatrice Clewer from his friend Lereux.

"And you've got them all with you?"

"Every one," lied the Apache again—more cheerfully now, for things seemed going well after all. He felt as if those five hundred pounds were already in his pocket.

"I'm glad to hear it." There was a smile on Martyn's lips, and he eyed the Frenchman with infinite disdain. "I should say you were new to the business of blackmailing or you'd never have brought the letters with you. A poor sort of rogue. Kindly empty out your pockets. Every one—and at once."

Bibi started to his feet, an imprecation upon his

lips. This was turning the tables with a vengeance. What a fool he had been! It was true that he should have made his negotiations first and produced the letters afterwards. This natural expedient had not occurred to his dull brain.

"Do as I bid you." Lord Martyn had risen, too, and taken a quick step in the direction of the Apache. The latter looked little more than a boy by the side of the burly Englishman.

Bibi retreated. "Milord will not purchase?" he faltered. "Then, please permit that I go."

He made a sudden dash for the door, but Martyn was too quick for him. Bibi's shoulders were gripped by two powerful hands. With a snarl of rage, like a trapped beast, the Apache, whose hands were still free, felt for, and found, his knife. He had no strength, but he had quickness and cunning. And that knife had already seen service.

CHAPTER XIX

THIS was not the first time in his life that Lord Martyn had been involved in trouble with gentlemen of the same kidney as Bibi Coupe-vide. He knew the dangers that had to be avoided. Your Apache may be physically weak—a poor specimen of humanity—but he has methods of self-defence which are apt to take the uninitiated by surprise.

Martyn remembered how he had once seen a friend of his—a big man, too—knocked out by an unexpected kick from a heavy boot under the jaw. So, to avoid any possible exercise of *la savate*—that un-English method of fighting—it was necessary to keep at close quarters. It was against Bibi's feet rather than his hands that the Englishman was on his guard.

And so Bibi got a blow in with his knife, but it was an ineffectual one. The blade pierced his opponent's coat over the right breast, and then met with an obstruction in the shape of a heavy gun-metal cigar case, which Lord Martyn happened to be carrying in his pocket. The shock of the impact wrenched the weapon from Bibi's hand, and the next moment he was swept from his feet, lifted up like a child, and then thrown down again, panting and half throttled, upon a low easy-chair.

He lay there gasping out the vilest invectives, but he made no attempt to renew the fray. Lord Martyn watched him for a moment or two, then he turned his attention to the rent in his coat, as though that were

of primary importance. Next he picked up the knife from the floor and threw it carelessly upon his desk.

"I think I'll keep that as a souvenir of our pleasant meeting," he remarked. "You'll have to get yourself another, my friend. A lot of good it would have done if you had stuck it into me," he added, smiling behind his beard, "for you couldn't have got away, you know."

He did not think for a moment of giving his assailant in charge. It would not have been like Martyn to do so.

Bibi growled an inaudible reply. He was getting his breath back, and beginning to contemplate the possibility of an escape. The letters still reposed in his pocket.

But they were not to remain there long. "If you won't turn out your pockets of your own accord, I shall have to do it for you," said Lord Martyn, "and I may possibly have to use you roughly in the job. You can see for yourself that you are quite helpless."

The fact, indeed, was self-evident. Bibi, huddled up in his chair, deprived of his knife, gasping still, was not in a position to offer resistance to anything that the powerful, muscular Englishman should command.

"Now, then—hurry up; I'll give you just one minute to hand over the letters," Martyn took out his watch and fixed his eyes upon it.

Bibi changed his tone to a whine. "Very well, milord. You shall have them. But you won't be hard upon me. I'm a poor man, and badly in need of money. If I were a blackmailer I'd not have brought the letters with me." It struck him that this was a point in his defence.

"The minute is nearly up." Lord Martyn slowly replaced his watch and advanced a step nearer. "Your

object was blackmail," he added. "It's your own look-out that you are a fool as well as a rogue."

Bibi muttered something under his breath, and then produced the papers. They were done up in a little packet and tied with delicate pink ribbon. Lord Martyn took them from the hand of the Apache, glanced at the top one, recognising at once the handwriting of Lady Beatrice Clewer, though it was still unformed and girlish, then, as some affectionate phrase met his eye, he swore an oath behind his beard, and thrust the letters into his pocket.

"That is all—you swear it?" there was a frown upon his forehead for which Bibi was not responsible. Even a cynic may cherish some illusions, and Lady Beatrice Clewer was the fondest of any that remained to Lord Martyn. He had enshrined her in a secret place in his heart, set her, in some curious way, apart from the common frailties of humanity. He had never admitted to living soul his weakness in his armour—he never would admit it. Nevertheless, the knowledge that Lady Beatrice was, after all, upon the same level as every other woman—as he regarded woman—had come to him as a staggering blow.

"*Mais oui*—that is all."

"Turn out all your pockets so that I may see."

Bibi obeyed with the best grace that he could muster under the circumstances. After all, it did not really matter that these letters should be given up. Even one by itself was quite as useful as the whole packet. Bibi reflected that he still had his weapon to hand, and, one day, he would take a fine revenge for the summary treatment that had been meted out to him. He wouldn't be content with five hundred pounds then—not he.

Lord Martyn was not content until he had seen all

Bibi's pockets thoroughly turned out. When this had been effectually done he drew back a pace or two and scrutinised the scowling face of the man in the chair with some amusement and rather more interest than he had hitherto manifested.

"So you've come off second best, my French friend," he remarked; "not that you didn't have a good try to put me out of the way. It's lucky for you that you failed." He glanced at the rent in his coat. "You'd have got yourself into a mess if you'd really hurt me. As it is, we'll say no more about that."

Bibi drew a deep breath of relief. He had had a lurking fear that the police might yet be called in, and that would have been disastrous for him just now. He rose gingerly, for his limbs still ached, to his feet.

"Then I may go?"

"In a minute—in a minute." Lord Martyn was still scrutinising Bibi's face intently. "It has just occurred to me," he went on, "that I've seen you before. You're an Apache of Montmartre, or some other part of Paris—a perfect type of your kind. Your sort don't often come to England. What are you doing over here and where the devil have I seen you?"

"How should I know—I?" Bibi shrugged his shoulders with a gesture that indicated impatience. He was anxious to be off.

"What is your name?"

"They call me Bibi Coupe-vide."

Lord Martyn's eyes shot a keen glance of recognition. He remembered quite well now. A picture quickly fashioned itself in his brain of a long hall, murky with tobacco smoke, and reeking of beer, spirits, and humanity. There was a stage at one end and a poor pretence of scenery. Those who could afford it found more elbow-room in little boxes raised a trifle

above the level of the *parterre,* but which were only divided from each other by waist-high partitions and which had no privacy about them. It was from one of these boxes that Lord Martyn had discovered—Zélie.

"Ah! You danced at the Florian?"

"Yes." Bibi drew himself up, trying to square his narrow shoulders. After all, he was a person of some importance. His reputation had preceded him—even with this *Milor Anglais.*

"With Zélie—who was called Zélie la Couleuvre?"

"Yes."

Lord Martyn pulled at his beard. A train of suspicion had been aroused in his mind. For, surely, the appearance of this fellow, this Apache, upon the scene was not wholly due to coincidence?

"I want you to tell me the whole truth. It may be very much to your advantage to do so. You know that Mademoiselle Zélie is in England?"

"Yes." It was slowly dawning upon Bibi that he might be committing himself. He shuffled nervously with his feet.

"Do you know where she is at present?"

"I suppose—in London." Bibi's replies were sullen. What was the meaning of these questions? Why should he trouble to answer them?

"Did you come to England with her?" This was the point concerning which Lord Martyn was most troubled. Zélie by herself was all very well, and would fulfil the destiny which he had foreseen for her, but if she were already hampered by a masculine appendage —and such a one!—then the prospects for the future took on a different aspect altogether.

"No. Why do you ask me these questions? Why should I answer them?" Bibi edged sideways towards

the door. "I've had enough. One would think that you belonged to the police yourself. Let me go."

"Not until we've had our talk out." Martyn spoke with decision. When he wished he could assume a tone that brooked no contradiction. He pointed to a chair, and Bibi, all against his will, and because he couldn't help himself, dropped into it.

For here was a mystery that had to be solved. If Zélie really cared for this fellow, then good-bye to her prospects of success. She had much better return to her native slums. But if, as was more likely, she was being followed, tracked, then some steps must be taken to rid her of the persecution.

Lord Martyn, unwilling to pay a farthing under compulsion, had no care for the money he spent to attain anything he desired. He stepped to his desk, unlocked a drawer, and produced a handful of banknotes.

"You may yet go away with your pockets lined," he said. "I'm a queer person, you see, M. Bibi l'Apache, and I bear you no grudge for trying to blackmail and then knife me. You just acted according to the ways of your kind, and you're no more responsible than if you were a puppet dangled at the end of a lot of strings. We're all of us dangled on strings, if it comes to that."

Lord Martyn laughed and broke off, recognising that he was not understood. "To come to the point," he went on in more ordinary tone. "I want you to tell me what you are doing in England, and what is your present connection with Mademoiselle Zélie."

Bibi greedily eyed the bank-notes that lay upon the desk. He had only to talk, to tell a plausible story, and they would be in his pocket. Certainly, it must be true, what he had so often heard, that all the English are mad.

But he did not allow his cupidity to blind him to the necessity for discretion. Bibi had his full share of natural cunning. He had divined that this *Milor* whose coat had fallen into his possession, was most probably the same one of whom Zélie had spoken when she referred to her new and powerful friends in England, through whose influence she was going to rise to such astonishing heights, and he would certainly have refrained from his attempt at blackmail had he anticipated any danger of his connection with Zélie being revealed. For, of course, that revelation might lead to others—all unpleasant. How he obtained the coat, for instance, and under what circumstances.

So he must be careful what he said, for his own sake as well as for Zélie's. It would be a catastrophe, indeed, if those wonderful prospects of hers should be interfered with because of his blunder—why, it would be the ruin of all the hopes he had been building for himself on the strength of her word! And that was most serious of all.

So Bibi was on his guard lest he should say a word to betray any immediate connection between Zélie and himself, and being a cunning rogue, with the blood of centuries of villainy in his veins, he contrived to put together a plausible story enough.

"I don't see that it's any affair of yours," he said, with a dogged sullenness that was more or less assumed to hide the avidity with which he had watched the production of the notes, "but since you want the information, and don't mind paying for it, I'm willing to talk. Go ahead. Ask any question you like."

Lord Martyn seated himself at his desk. He kept his eyes fixed upon the face of the Apache as he proceeded with his interrogatory.

"You tell me you did not accompany Zélie to England. Is that the truth?"

"It is. I swear it."

"Why did you come?"

"Mon Dieu!" Bibi spread out his palms. He was speaking the truth because there was, at present, no object in lying. "She had left me and she was my *gosse.* I had been in gaol—on her account. I was wild with her—jealous. And there were other reasons why I wished to be out of Paris. I had enemies, you understand, fellows who would have knifed me—in the dark. So I came to London—to find Zélie."

"And you found her?"

It was now that caution was needed. Bibi was equal to the occasion. "Not to speak to. I traced her to a club in London. I knew she would go there—to see a friend."

"The Delphic Club?"

"That's it. She came out with two gentlemen—I could not see their faces. She drove off with them in an automobile. I did not venture to interfere. But I followed—running. The street was crowded, and the carriage couldn't travel fast. Luckily it didn't go far. It stopped at the door of a big restaurant——"

"An hotel," corrected Martyn. So far the story sounded reasonable enough.

"Zélie got out—and the two gentlemen. I think that one of them was yourself, milord. All three went into the hotel. Again I did not dare to follow. The automobile drew up in a rank with the other carriages to wait. I hung about it—you see, I wanted to find out about Zélie. An opportunity came—the chauffeur was talking to other men—I looked in and saw the coat lying there——" Bibi paused dramatically.

"You took it—stole it?"

"It was not that I meant to steal. I thought that I might find in the pockets something that would help me to get into definite touch with Zélie. You understand me, milord—it was my love for her that prompted me." Bibi flattered himself that he was telling his story quite artistically. "She would not have spoken to me had I ventured to address her that afternoon. So it was all that I could do—to take the coat."

"This was last Saturday—nearly five days ago. Why did you not come to see me earlier? My card was in a pocket of the cloak. I presume that M. Bibi Coupe-vide was occupied in obtaining his facts in order to turn the letters he had found to improper account. The desire to trace Zélie gave way to this glorious chance of blackmail. Am I right?"

Lord Martyn put the question quietly, though with a disdainful curve of his lip. He was inclined to believe the story, which certainly sounded plausible, and was relieved to know that there was no manner of connection at present between his *protégée* and this very undesirable alien. That was the main point, and it was his business to see that Bibi Coupe-vide was packed out of the country as soon as possible.

"I thought you would be pleased to have the letters, and that at the same time I might find my Zélie," admitted Bibi unabashed. He felt proud of himself for having tackled a difficult task so successfully. He had not said a single word to betray Zélie, and he had fully earned those notes that lay there so invitingly on the desk.

"I see." Lord Martyn carefully selected five of the notes and folded them slowly. "So that is your story. And you swear that you have not spoken to Mademoiselle Zélie since she has been in England?"

"I swear it."

"Good. Well, M. Bibi Coupe-vide, it strikes me that you are such a fine specimen of a rogue that your talents are wasted in England. I suggest that you return to your native country—and stay there. The price you asked for the letters was five hundred pounds. Well, I will give you fifty pounds now and a card of introduction to my agent in Paris, who will pay you fifty pounds a month for the next year as long as you can prove to his satisfaction and mine that you have not attempted to return to this country. What do you say?"

The offer was a tempting one. Fifteen hundred francs a month! to say nothing of Zélie's promises of untold wealth to come if he should succeed in doing what she wished him to do. And he had laid his plans for that—plans which were bound to be successful. Yes, he could safely promise to leave the country!

There could no longer be any vestige of doubt in his mind that what Zélie had told him was true. She had found powerful friends and was going to make her mark. She must have a free hand—for year perhaps. After that—well, she was still *la gosse à Bibi,* his name was indelibly impressed upon her arm, and he would see to it that he kept his own.

"I consent," he said, so eagerly that Lord Martyn was constrained to smile.

The remaining details were quickly settled. Bibi promised to return to London that day. He was to be driven to the station and seen off by one of Lord Martyn's servants. Here Bibi made a mental reservation that no one need be any the wiser if he should return by a late train that evening—as, indeed, would be necessary if he was to carry out his plans. He would get out at another station a few miles from Selwood, and walk across country. The fact that he

would be apparently leaving for London that afternoon in so open a manner fitted in most excellently with his projects.

He undertook to be in Paris by Saturday morning. He was to call on the agent at once, so that his arrival might be reported. This again suited him admirably. For, if all fell out as Bibi hoped, he would have struck his blow at Owen Mayne before another twelve hours were over, and then, naturally, a speedy flight from England was indicated. Oh, yes, he trusted to be safely in Paris by Saturday morning. And he would not be hampered by the want of money, either—he had certainly been in luck when he decided to call upon this mad Englishman! Affairs that begin badly often turn out well.

These matters having been duly settled, Lord Martyn handed over the stipulated number of notes, which Bibi grabbed with lean and none too clean fingers. Then the bell was rung, the butler summoned, and instructions given as to the train by which the Frenchman must leave and the manner of his conveyance to the station.

They passed out of the study into the great hall together, Lord Martyn a little in advance. And it was at that very moment that Zélie, escorted by Stephen Aldis, appeared, coming from the side corridor that led to the terrace entrance. Martyn muttered an oath in his beard, but the meeting was inevitable.

Aldis and the French girl were laughing together, evidently on the best of terms. It was the luncheon hour, and Zélie was making a pretence of taking off her hat. The actor was attempting to help her. There was a familiarity about the whole proceeding which must have struck the most casual observer.

Bibi was hidden by the stalwart form of Lord Mar-

tyn. It was the latter only that Zélie saw. She ran forward, her eyes flashing with merriment.

"I have sought for you, milord," she exclaimed, "but they always tell me you are busy. And since noon, M. Aldis, he has not left me alone, though I tell him there are those who will be jealous."

Suddenly she broke off—she had caught sight of Bibi slouching behind her host.

The smile deserted her lips, and her thin, small face took on that unhuman and feline expression which was peculiar to it in moments of annoyance. Her lips quivered as though there were venom upon them. Lord Martyn, watching her, was not ill-pleased. For it was evident that Zélie did not welcome this apparition from the past.

"It's all right, Zélie," he explained, quickly. "M. Bibi Coupe-vide—I believe that is the gentleman's name—and I have been having a talk, and we have arranged matters quite harmoniously. As a matter of fact, I rather fancy that this meeting is as unexpected to him as it is to you."

The fact was self-evident. Bibi had had no idea that Zélie was at Chamney Castle when he had decided upon his visit to Lord Martyn. He had imagined her in London, making the arrangements for her English stage career, and, doubtless, waiting impatiently for intelligence from him that he had succeeded in avenging her with Owen Mayne.

He was taken utterly aback, and his face expressed a foolish surprise that had, also, something of trepidation in it. For, despite his brutality, he was not without a certain fear and respect for Zélie.

To think that this splendid creature was his *gosse,* Zélie la Couleuvre, the Dancing Girl of Montmatre! It seemed almost outside the realms of possibility.

"Zélie," he gasped. *"Nom de Dieu,* but who'd have thought it?"

Zélie quickly recovered herself; indeed, it was only Lord Martyn who had noticed the flash of malevolent anger which had crossed her face. Her quick brain had realised the purport of Bibi's visit. She had anticipated from the first moment when she had heard of the lost papers that such an event might occur. It was not to intrude himself upon her that Bibi had come to Chamney Castle, and it was evident enough that, whatever had happened between him and Lord Martyn, no harm to herself had been done.

And, all at once, a sudden inspiration came to her. Her whole face lit up, her eyes sparkled, and her white teeth flashed.

"'Cré nom!" she exclaimed in her turn, bursting into a ringing laugh. "Who'd have thought it? My Bibi!" She took Bibi's hand, shaking it with unnecessary violence, laughing melodiously all the time. The Apache seemed to shrink from her, regarding her furtively from the corners of his narrow eyes.

"M. Bibi is leaving for London by an early train this afternoon, Zélie," explained Lord Martyn, after he had watched the scene for a moment, appreciating the comedy of it. "He came to see me on a matter of business, and this is really only a chance meeting. I have arranged to send him to the station."

But this arrangement did not appeal to Zélie. She had formed other plans. "Ah, *mais non!"* she cried. "I cannot allow my Bibi to depart thus. Bibi shall dance with me to-night. We will perform our famous *Danse du Néant"*—she clapped her hands together delightedly—"and you shall see—ah, you shall see what a success Bibi and I will make of it!"

CHAPTER XX

Of course, Zélie had her way, though her proposal was hardly received with acclamation. On the contrary, Lord Martyn did his utmost to dissuade her from such a course, while Stephen Aldis both looked and spoke his disapprobation.

Yet, in a way, Martyn was amused, and, after all, he cared not a snap of his fingers for what people said about him.

And so arrangements were made for a rehearsal that afternoon, and then the scene came to a conclusion.

Bibi was left in the temporary charge of the unhappy Ronaldson, who showed himself peculiarly averse to the job. He was to be given a good meal and looked after generally. Luckily for the butler, Cooper, Lord Martyn's valet, was thoroughly conversant with French, and could be pressed into service also.

Ronaldson's mental denunciation of "furriners" included Zélie as well as the masculine intruder.

Before joining the rest of the house-party at lunch Lord Martyn seized the opportunity to have a private word with Stephen Aldis. He drew the latter into his study and closed the door.

"Steve, old man," he said, "you'll be glad to hear that I've done a stroke of business on your account. You can set your mind at rest about those letters. Here they are."

Martyn produced the packet of papers, still tied up with pink ribbon, from his pocket, and handed it to

his friend. "You may thank your lucky stars," he went on, "that you've got out of the mess so easily."

Aldis was loud in his exclamations of surprise and thanks. He scrutinised the letters, but without undoing the ribbon. There was a warm flush upon his cheek. "But how on earth did you get them, Harry?" he inquired.

Lord Martyn told the story briefly. "The fellow came to England in pursuit of Zélie, you see," he exclaimed, "but I think it's true that they have not actually met before to-day. Indeed, I'm quite sure that they were both genuinely surprised and taken aback. And now, if I were you," he added, "I'd destroy those letters before they are capable of doing any real damage, and then you can meet Lady Beatrice with a more or less easy conscience."

Aldis protested eagerly that he would do as he was advised. "I can't say how grateful to you I am, Harry," he muttered, "nor how ashamed of myself. But you'll think none the worse of Lady Beatrice, will you? Believe me, it was nothing on her part but just a silly, girlish prank."

"I'm quite sure of that," responded Martyn readily, but he turned his head away so that Aldis could not see his face.

"And now"—Martyn glanced at the rent in his coat—"both you and I—I especially—will want to get ready for lunch." He tapped his breast and smiled. "And my dear Steve, let this be a warning to you. Zélie is dangerous. Don't play with edged tools—you have no need to. Of course, it's a fascinating game——"

"She's a siren, Harry." Aldis blurted out the avowal. "She makes me lose my head. I don't know why, because she doesn't really encourage me, rather the reverse. I know I shall never win her, and that's

the devil of it. For I feel that I must go on, that she's the one thing I want upon earth. It's a torture and a delight. When I'm alone I tell myself that I'm a fool and I try to think of Cecily, but it's no use. Zélie absorbs me. I could curse you for taking her up and I could thank you on my bended knees. That's how I feel."

"Keep out of her way, Steve," said Martyn, his usual bluff tone softening. "Go back to London tomorrow. I thought that you, at least, were safe. I didn't sharpen my panther's claws for you." Suddenly his voice changed again, and he turned sharply upon Aldis. "Good heavens, man, haven't you got your Cecily, haven't you got all the most beautiful women in London at your feet? Can't you be content?"

"A man always wants the unattainable," muttered Aldis almost sullenly.

"He turns naturally to the evil," retorted Martyn mockingly. "Well, well, Steve," he added, "it's not for me to control you. You're a man of mature understanding. Which means that if someone points out a way to you you're bound to take the other. So please consider my advice unsaid."

"A queer fellow, Harry," was Aldis's private comment as, a little later, he made his way to the dining-room. "I sometimes wonder if those people aren't right who say he's a bit mad."

As for Martyn, he remained alone in his study for a few minutes after the departure of his friend. He sat by his desk, resting his chin in the palm of one of his hands, while with the other he played with the knife which he had secured from Bibi. He ran his finger along the edge.

"The panther's claw"—so he communed with himself—"yes, it's sharp and keen. There was once a

man," he went on, as if he were telling himself a story, "who made it his profession to scoff and despise his fellows. And he owned a panther, which lived safely ensconced behind its bars. And one and all admired it, saying, 'How sleek is its coat, how wonderful its eyes, how graceful its gait!' Then, one day, in derision, he unloosed the bars and the panther was free. And, first of all, it turned upon those who were nearest and dearest to the man's heart, and rent them limb from limb, and, as he tried to cage it once more, it fell upon him and rent him too."

Lord Martyn quietly dropped the knife into a drawer of his desk, then he pushed back his chair and rose.

"Which things are an allegory," he added, as he made his slow way to his room. Here he changed his clothes and made elaborate preparations for meeting his guests at the luncheon table.

He was smiling again when he seated himself at their head, quite restored to his normal self. And Zélie was placed beside him upon his left.

CHAPTER XXI

THEY were rehearsing that afternoon in the great ball-room of Chamney Castle, where the entertainment was to take place some hours later. It was great fun, more particularly perhaps because the workpeople were still busy with the decorations and general preparations, and, consequently, confusion and general pandemonium reigned from end to end of the hall.

Beyond the four great marble pillars which divided the room into two parts a stage had been erected with all the requisite accessories. A space had been railed off for the orchestra, which, however, when the time for the performance came, would be practically hidden by banks of flowers. There was to be dancing after supper, when the orchestra would be removed to a more prominent position upon the stage. A smaller hall adjoining the main apartment afforded all the accommodation that was needed for the chaperons. Three great windows upon the south side gave direct access to the terrace, lawns, and garden of the Castle.

Outside the hall there was almost as much movement as within, for the lawns were being edged with thousands of multi-coloured fairy lamps, while Chinese lanterns were being suspended from all the available trees within a wide radius of the Castle.

Zélie was enjoying herself mightily and was already quite conscious of the fact that she was regarded as a kind of queen of the forthcoming revelry. She had, in

fact, not been a dozen hours at Chamney Castle before it was evident that all the men at least were at her feet. The women, perhaps, held more aloof. But, then, Zélie never troubled herself about the opinion of her own sex.

Of course, the guests whom Lord Martyn had collected together under his roof were all more or less of the Bohemian order. Had it been otherwise Zélie would certainly have found it more difficult to hold her own. She was, however, happily unconscious of any such social distinctions, and imagined herself already moving among the proudest of England's aristocracy.

And certainly the names of her fellow-guests were such as might well have excused the misunderstanding. Some twenty in all, there was hardly one, man or woman, who was not well known through the length and breadth of the land—and beyond it.

Such, for instance, were Stephen Aldis and Cecily Cuthbert, both stage constellations of magnitude; such was Mme. de Freyne, known to the cosmopolitan world of letters; such, again, was Sir Donald Ransom, who had latterly achieved great fame by his explorations over unknown territory in Central Asia.

It was towards the close of one of these expeditions that Sir Donald had fallen in with Lord Martyn, and the two men had been fast friends ever since. Lord Martyn, therefore, had regarded the young explorer's engagement to Lady Beatrice Clewer, for whom he had so deep and tender a regard, with especial eyes of favour.

Lady Beatrice herself, now some twenty-two years of age, was one of the most popular figures, as well as the most beautiful, in London society. Her father, the Earl of Albyn, had been a highly placed diplomat.

He had devoted all his love to Lady Beatrice, and it was upon his death, little more than two years ago, that he had invoked the good will of his friend Lord Martyn on behalf of his fondly loved daughter. For, as it happened, the present Countess of Albyn, the Earl's second wife, was a woman addicted to fast company. She loved to squander large sums at Monte Carlo, while her figure was a familiar one upon the race-course. Scandal had more than once attached itself to her name. But for this she did not care a scrap. She was a good-natured woman, very much of the horsy type, and she liked to talk to men as if she herself belonged to their sex.

So much of the Albyn history was generally known. But there were many who affirmed that the secret side of it had not yet been written, but that if Lord Martyn cared to speak he could tell a story which would astonish Society. Lord Martyn, however, was not the kind of man to unseal his lips for the gratification of vulgar curiosity.

Of course, the Countess of Albyn was of the house party, and besides her, to name but two or three who had already attracted Zélie's attention, there were Gilbert Farrington, the eccentric artist, George Hamand, the famous gentleman rider, and Guy Menzies, who would undoubtedly be a Cabinet Minister when his party were once more returned to power.

Zélie was anxious to have a talk with Bibi, but it needed some careful manœuvring to bring about the desired interview. She found it necessary at last to appeal to Lord Martyn that he should have the stage cleared in order that she and Bibi might rehearse their *Danse du Néant*. The rest of her performance had already been arranged, but she would have to instruct the leader of the orchestra in certain points which it

was essential for him to observe if the dance were to be a success.

And so Bibi was sent for, and he arrived, accompanied by the French-speaking valet, just as a laughing company of young people scrambled down from the stage in obedience to Lord Martyn's imperative but genially spoken order. Bibi felt himself stared at, despised, made an object of derision. He was quite sure that they were laughing at him, and as he stepped back to allow the little group to pass he scowled and assumed an even more hang-dog expression than he wore habitually.

"What an ugly-looking brute!" It was Sir Donald who whispered the remark to his *fiancée.* "He looks as if he'd like to stick a knife into any one of us. I don't know what Martyn's about to allow such a fellow to take part in the show."

"He's going to dance with your Mlle. Zélie," replied the girl, slightly accenting the pronoun. Sir Donald, in her opinion, had already been over-attentive to the French girl.

"Well, she's a marvel by herself," responded the man, "and if she dances as they say she does, she's going to take London by storm."

"She frightens me," replied the girl simply. Then she turned to Cecily Cuthbert, who was just behind her, and linked her arm in that of the young actress, for whom she was feeling no little sympathy.

"What shall we do next, now that we're turned out of the hall, Cecily?" she asked lightly. "I move we get Donald to take us for a row on the lake. It's so oppressively hot, and we could just paddle about for a bit. We needn't be energetic, since we shall be dancing till dawn."

She glanced up appealingly at her tall, handsome lover. "You'll take us, Don, won't you?"

Sir Donald promised he would. He smiled down into the eyes of the girl, taking no heed of the very gentle rebuke which she had offered him. He was guiltily conscious of having paid Zélie rather more attention than he need.

"No, you must excuse me," said Cecily, quietly disengaging her arm. "I'm sure you two will be quite happy by yourselves." Her eyes were directed towards the stage, Stephen Aldis was still lingering there. His figure was just visible in the wings, and he was talking with Zélie, who had thrown herself down upon a property chair.

"Come along, Bee," said Donald. "We'll saunter down towards the lake. Cecily may be able to join us later on. Poor little woman," he added, as he gently conducted his *fiancée* through one of the windows that opened on to the garden. "She's consumed with jealousy, and I must say that Aldis is playing it up rather thick."

And so, laughing and whispering to each other the sweet nothings in which young lovers delight, they strolled happily to the lake, where they embarked upon a little boat and lost themselves for the rest of the afternoon in the shadow of the great trees whose leafy branches overhung the water.

In the meanwhile Zélie was all impatience to get rid of the persistent Stephen Aldis. "There's Miss Cuthbert waiting for you," she said, "and she's been looking daggers at both of us all day." Zélie gave a short, rather malicious laugh. "At least, I can't call it looking daggers," she added, "for that isn't the way with your Englishwomen. They just appear sad and

as if they wanted to shed tears. I call that silly, for no man's worth weeping for."

"Have you ever cried, Zélie?" he asked musingly.

"I?" She laughed again, a hard laugh. "Yes, with passion, and, once or twice, long ago, because I was cold and hungry. But for love"—she shrugged her narrow shoulders—"ah, *mais non*—never, never!"

It was at this moment that Bibi stepped on to the stage. He was approaching from the opposite wing, and he stared about him with surly defiance. The valet, having brought him safely to his destination, had remained in the body of the hall. He had his instructions not to let his charge out of sight.

"And you're going to dance to-night with this fellow?" said Aldis in an undertone. "What do you do it for, Zélie? You are so charming, so wonderful, by yourself. And to think that you will be held in the arms of a creature like that—it is revolting."

And yet, even as he said the words, he knew that it was all right and proper, artistically just as it should be. For Bibi Coupe-vide was the mate that nature had ordained for Zélie, the Snake-woman, Zélie, Queen of the Apaches, who was in truth out of her element at Chamney Castle.

Zélie stared at him as if she did not fully understand. "Revolting? To dance with my Bibi? Ah, *mais non, par exemple,* for Bibi can dance—you shall see for yourself to-night."

Aldis abandoned the task as hopeless. At any rate, he reflected, this objectionable intruder was to be packed off the next day. And though Lord Martyn had yielded on this occasion to Zélie's solicitude, hardly being able to prevent himself under the circumstances, he would certainly not be so weak again.

"And now I want to talk to Bibi about the dance. You must go away."

Zélie had risen and was standing face to face with the actor, her hands clasped behind her back, her face impertinently tilted up, her chin prominent, her red, alluring lips parted over the white, cruel teeth.

Stephen Aldis forgot the Apache standing there upon the stage within a few yards of him, forgot everything save that this woman maddened and intoxicated him. He opened his arms, and it was all he could do to refrain from kissing her where she stood.

"You black witch!" he muttered hoarsely. "I don't know what you have done to me. You have the fascination of all the evil things that were ever put into the world. You make my brain reel."

She stepped back a pace or two, still smiling up at him, revelling in her power over the brute in man. She lifted a slim forefinger, and shook it at him warningly, mockingly.

Well might she do so. For the little scene between them was doubly observed. Bibi, slouching about the stage, saw it, and scowled darkly under his dark brows, while Cecily, standing among the palms by one of the windows, saw it too, and, for all the warmth of the day, her heart felt numb and cold within her breast.

CHAPTER XXII

"WHO is that fellow?" demanded Bibi, as soon as Aldis had reluctantly taken his departure. "He has the mug of a *cabotin*—an actor. I don't like him."

"You're quite right, Bibi," responded Zélie, suavely kissing her fingers to Aldis, who had turned, as he reached the great central window of the hall which opened upon the terrace, for a last glance at the stage. "M. Aldis is an actor. He is a good friend of mine."

"I don't like him," repeated Bibi. He seized the girl's hands and held them tight. "This M. Aldis—I know something of him. He had best look to himself. And as for you, understand once more, *ma fille,*" he went on, "that though I give you a free hand, there's to be no falling in love. You belong to Bibi."

Zélie frowned a little, but nevertheless thought it well to humour the man. It would be time enough to free herself from him when he had carried out the part which she had allotted to him. "You have nothing to fear, *mon Bibi,*" she murmured. "All that I do is for my interests—and yours. There is no other thought but that in my brain. I am yours, and it is for us that I work. One day when your pockets are full of money you will know." Bibi's cupidity was his weakest point, and Zélie knew how to make the best of it.

"Very well," grumbled the Apache. "As long as you love no one but me—that's the main point."

The conversation had been carried on in quick undertones. There remained a great deal to be said, however, for neither Zélie nor Bibi had as yet been able to touch upon the essential topic that had to be discussed between them. And the conductor of the orchestra appeared anxious to get to work with the rehearsing.

With her usual promptitude Zélie took the matter in hand. There had been no difficulty as to the score of the *"Danse du Néant,"* for that dance, success as it had been in Paris, was already well known to the foreign musicians whom Lord Martyn had engaged. Zélie walked up to the conductor. He was a slim, sleek-haired Italian, who, however, spoke French, and who availed himself of every opportunity to leer suggestively at the dancing-girl.

Zélie smiled on him, quite ready to exert her fascination—he would be all the more keen upon her success when the time for the performance came; he would make his men play up, and would see to it that all the necessary pauses and points were duly observed. It was to these that she now called his attention.

She expounded them to him briefly, requesting him to run over the music once or twice while she talked to her friend.

The conductor smiled and bowed, and Zélie, gratifying him with another fascinating glance, turned away and, humming the melody of the dance, pirouetted lightly up the stage till she was once more by Bibi's side.

"Now we can talk," she said. "We can have a few minutes without interruption. But we must be brief. Why did you come here?" She regarded him with a certain contempt. "Ah, but I know, I can guess," she went on. "You have those papers which were in the

pocket of Lord Martyn's coat. You came to blackmail. Is it not so?"

Bibi responded with a surly nod. What was the use of denying the obvious? "I didn't know you were here," he muttered. "How was I to know? I needed money since I had to escape from the country in a hurry. You didn't give me enough. I was at Selwood, you know why, and I found out that this Lord Martyn lived in the neighbourhood. It's simple, isn't it?"

"You haven't betrayed me?" she asked anxiously, tapping the boards of the stage impatiently with her heel. "You haven't said a word to Lord Martyn to indicate that it was I who gave you the coat? If you have it may ruin my chances."

"Not a word," he replied. "I was too clever for that Zélie." He drew up his rounded shoulders and leered. "I saw how things stood, and I invented a story, a clever story. This *milor* and I, we understand each other. We have made a harmonious agreement. All was well, Zélie, till you came upon the scene and spoilt it."

"What do you mean?" she asked. Then, suddenly, she pressed her hands to her ears, as discordant sounds reached her from the orchestra.

"Ah *mais non, mais non,*" she exclaimed, darting forward to the footlights. "It's not like that. Would you that we dance that measure to jig time?" She spread out her hands, appealing pathetically to the conductor.

She beat time with her finger while the orchestra repeated the passage, then she turned to Bibi. "What do you mean," she repeated, "that I spoilt it all?"

"By insisting that I should stay at *milor's* castle the night," he grumbled. "Couldn't you see that I didn't

want to—that I had other plans? They were on your account, those plans, and you have upset them."

Zélie's eyes became mere slits. "What were your plans?" she inquired.

He laid his hand upon her arm, drawing her still further back into the wnigs. She had to bend her head to him to catch the whispered words. The orchestra was playing its loudest just then.

"What was it you asked me to do? To kill Owen Mayne, *n'est-ce pas?* Very well. It was to-night that he would have died. To-night—and I am here helpless."

Zélie wrinkled her brows. "You would have killed him to-night—how, then?"

"There will be a burglary at Selwood Manor," he explained hurriedly. "It has all been settled. I have been working with a man to whom Alphonse introduced me. His name is Jim Lamprey, and Alphonse says he's the cleverest thief in the country. A burglary—it is easy for a man to be killed in a house when thieves break in, is it not so? I have been hanging about the house for days, yes I, myself. More than once in the garden and the park I saw Owen Mayne and I might have killed him then, taken him by surprise, fallen upon him from the bushes—but it was not safe. I might not have got away. But breaking into the house, that is another matter. The police will look out for the thieves—for a gang—they will not suspect Bibi."

He had been speaking hurriedly, gesticulating with bony fingers, but never raising his voice above an undertone. "And now you have spoilt all that," he growled, "and Heaven alone knows why you wanted to keep me at Chamney Castle."

Zélie had listened without interrupting. The frown

upon her forehead deepened, however, as the man expounded his plans. When he had finished she gave utterance to a short, disdainful laugh. "My poor Bibi," she said, "it is you who have been deceived. This man—this Jim Lamprey, as you call him—he must have known. He has just made use of you for his own purposes. It was he, I expect, who settled to-night for the burglary. Is it not so?"

"Yes." Bibi screwed up his face in puzzled wonder. "I don't understand you, Zélie."

"No, but you will," she retorted. "Your burglar friend fixed on to-night for the simple reason that there would be no men in the house except the servants. If you had not been a fool, you'd have found it out. Both Owen Mayne and his friend, Robin Clithero, will be here"—she stamped her tiny foot. "Do I speak plainly? They will be here, at Chamney Castle."

Bibi collapsed. He had sufficient intelligence to see at once how he had been taken in. He was to assist in this burglary, to have taken the greater part of the risk upon his own head, and for no object whatever. The man whom he meant to slay would not be in the house at all.

Bibi broke out into a volume of coarse invective, no longer caring about the modulation of his voice. It was lucky that the orchestra was still playing loudly.

Zélie laughed at him—she mocked him. He felt himself lowered in her eyes; there was something in her scorn, scorn which she took no trouble to conceal from him, which scorched and burnt him.

She lifted her hand and put an end to the current of abuse. At any other time she would not have spared Bibi the verbal expression of her disdain, but now—well, she had her own plans, and it was for Bibi to retrieve his folly by carrying them out.

"I am more clever than you, my Bibi," she said, laying her hand upon his shoulder, "and I have arranged things so that all may yet go well. Your M. Lamprey may have his burglary to-night, and it is well for you that you will not be there." She fixed her eyes upon him—it was she who was the dominating spirit now.

"Do you guess why I have kept you at Chamney," she asked, "why I made the excuse that we should dance together to-night?"

He nodded his head. He was subdued in spirit. "Because Owen Mayne will be here," he hazarded.

"Exactly. And so, what you would have failed to do at Selwood you shall do at Chamney. I have thought it all out, and my plans are made. There is less danger for you, Bibi, than there would have been at Selwood. I saw it in a flash, and so I asked Lord Martyn that you should stay."

Her eyes glittered and she spoke in tones of suppressed excitement. For a moment the voice of the conductor could be heard cursing his men in voluble Italian, then the violins began to wail a fierce, cruel melody—the essential motive of the *"Danse du Néant."*

The music harmonised with the spirit of Zélie's speech.

"Listen to me carefully, Bibi, *mon gars.* If you do exactly as I tell you all will be well. This afternoon, later on, I will take you to a summer-house which I have seen in the garden. It is not very far away, but it is in a spot where they are hanging no lamps. There is a hedge just behind it and a public footpath. To that summer-house I will lead Owen Mayne to-night. It will be after supper is over, when we shall be free to do as we please. Yes, I, myself, I will lead him there—and it shall be to his death."

She stood erect, drawing deep breaths, yet, save for the quick rise and fall of her bosom, she might have been talking of some ordinary topic—not discussing treachery and murder.

Bibi glanced at her with suppressed admiration. He thought her fine. And she was his, his *gosse!* His whole being swelled with pride. Ah, yes, he would do this thing for her—for her sake, and because of the money which she had promised him.

"You must break down the hedge and trample the grass beyond it," Zélie went on, "so that it will appear as if someone, some thief, had entered from without. You must rifle Owen Mayne's pockets and take his watch; then they will say, 'It is a thief who has done this thing.' When all is over, you must make your way back to the house and let people see you, so that there shall be no suspicion. To run away would be to betray us. To-morrow you will go at the time which has been appointed for you. You understand me?"

Bibi nodded—he understood clearly.

Zélie bent her lips still closer to his ear. "I will contrive it so," she whispered, "that he stands with his back turned to the door of the summer-house. You are concealed among the bushes close at hand. You approach quietly—very quietly—so." She lifted herself upon tiptoe and made pantomimic gestures to indicate what he should do. She took a few steps, passing in front of him, and she had a movement of her shoulders that was animal, feline, curiously suggestive of the panther to which she had been compared.

"You have the knife in your hand. He is standing there with his back turned—what could be easier? You lift your hand—you strike—so—it is all over."

She was acting the part as she spoke, living in it. There was a red glow before her eyes, and in imagina-

tion she already saw Owen Mayne lying dead at her feet.

"Good," said Bibi, hoarsely, "I will do it. But I have no knife—I—I have lost mine."

Zélie was still in possession of hers. It had never left her since the day she picked it up at Owen's studio. She produced it now and pressed it into Bibi's hand. "He shall die with his own knife," she muttered.

A few more hurried sentences and all was arranged Zélie gripped Bibi by the arm and drew him forward to the front of the stage. Here she dropped a smiling curtsy to the oily conductor—a curtsy that was altogether theatrical.

"We are ready now, monsieur," she said.

The conductor—he was a big man in his way and had been engaged at great expense—bowed graciously, swung his baton, and once more the curious wailing rhythm of the opening bars of the melody made itself heard. It was upon such notes as these that the dance opened—almost as if the composer had sought to express in a few notes the sob of suffering humanity—and it was to the same refrain that the music ended.

A dance—but a Dance of Death!

CHAPTER XXIII

STEPHEN ALDIS had hardly stepped through the window of the great hall, leaving its cool, semi-obscurity behind him—an obscurity due to the heavily banked up palms and flowers—and passed into the sunlight, before he felt a light touch upon his arm and turned to recognise Cecily.

He muttered an oath inwardly. His mind had been so full of Zélie that the sight of the fair girl, who might have belonged to another world altogether, came almost as an offence to him. Besides, why was not Cecily amusing herself with the other guests? Why was she looking here in the scorching sun upon the terrace? She had been waiting for him, of course. It was ridiculous, and really she was making him quite conspicuous.

"My dear Cecily, what on earth are you doing here?" he said, coming to an abrupt halt. "Why, I thought your complexion was your first care."

"I was waiting for you, Steve," she admitted, her tone almost humble. "I knew you must come out directly."

"Why should you wait?" he asked sharply.

"I've seen so little of you, Steve," she pleaded. "You are not going to avoid me, are you? I thought perhaps you'd take me for a row on the lake." She tried to force a smile. "Lady Beatrice wanted me to go with her and Sir Donald. But I thought I might be

in the way. It's a case of two's company there, isn't it?"

"You might just as well have gone," he replied, taking little trouble to conceal his displeasure. "People must have noticed you hanging about here. It makes me look ridiculous."

Her hand dropped from his arm and they walked on together, side by side, in silence. They descended the broad stone staircase and were soon treading upon the soft, velvety grass of the lawn.

Aldis felt as if he had come straight from the heart of some wild, primeval forest—that was while he had been in that darkened room with Zélie—and now he had been brought back, forcibly awakened as it were to ultra-civilisation as represented by this delicate hothouse plant, forced and artificial, this fair girl who was compelling his attention.

He was fond of Cecily—yes, certainly, he was fond of her, but not now; the sight of her pale cheeks and pathetic blue eyes, as well as the little droop of her dainty lips, hurt him—his soul was not attuned to hers at that moment. It was the fierce, the savage, the primitive, for which he craved, and this desire which had taken possession of him made him fierce and savage and primitive too.

Cecily had met him in an evil hour.

She slipped her hand under his arm once more. "I want to have a chat with you, Steve," she said. "Don't let's go where there's anyone else. I'm not in the mood to chatter commonplaces. Lady Albyn almost drove me crazy this morning with her gossiping about the latest stage scandals. She seems to have fixed upon me as a special victim. And she's over there with her usual boys in attendance, and her wretched little pug

dog." The girl gave a nervous shiver. "I hate the little beast."

He shrugged his shoulders and came to a halt. "Where shall we go?" he said shortly. Then he added quickly: "I haven't got long to give you, Cecily."

A flush stole over the girl's cheeks. She knew what he meant. He was to meet Zélie when she had finished rehearsing.

"Let us go to the lake," she proposed eagerly. There were paths encircling the water from which the house could not be seen—paths which were made for lovers; surely there, if there was any power in her, she could make Stephen Aldis forget his hateful obsession? Surely there she could win him back to herself?

"No," he said curtly, "we won't go as far as that, Cecily. It's cool and shady by the fountain, and I see they've put some chairs there. That will do very well."

He led the way, walking with long strides, the girl having some difficulty in keeping pace with him.

The fountain, with its circular marble basin and its golden Triton and dolphins, lay in full view of the terrace. Aldis seated himself, dropping languidly into a low deck chair, in such a position that he could see at once when Zélie should leave the hall if, as he expected, she should follow by the same way which he had taken.

Cecily seated herself upon the marble rim of the fountain and for a few moments gazed down into the water without speaking. She was watching the gold and silver fish darting quickly by, sporting in the clear water of the pool.

Aldis lit a cigarette. "Well, now you've got me

here," he said, "you don't seem eager to talk. What's the trouble, Cecily? Let's have it out."

"I don't know that there is any trouble," she murmured nervously. "I—I hope there isn't. It's only this, Steve, that you've been very kind to me lately. You've neglected me a little, haven't you? And—and I feel it."

She pressed her hands to her bosom; her heart was beating quickly, painfully.

Aldis knocked the ash from his cigarette. "I don'd know about neglecting you," he said. "We've always been the best of friends, Cecily, and I hope we shall remain so. It's to our mutual interest, isn't it? The public like to see us acting together, and I'm quite ready to promise you the part of Maisie when we put up *The Golden East.* That's one of the fondest wishes of your heart, isn't it? Only, for Heaven's sake, my dear girl, don't always be hanging about me and making me conspicuous. People have said all sorts of things already which are not a bit justified by fact. I haven't worried my head about it, and don't mean to unless you compel me."

He was trying, even against the instincts that animated him at that moment, to let her down gently. He knew how eager she was to play that part in his next production. Surely she should be contented with the promise he had just given her?

Cecily had deceived herself with false hopes—that was the tragedy of it. She had believed that she had succeeded where so many other women had failed. But those happy dreams were over now, and she was learning the bitter lesson of her own weakness. She was treading a path which others had trodden before her, but for Cecily Cuthbert the weeds were more rank and the thorns more sharp than her predecessors had

found them. It was a matter of temperament, no more than that.

"I thought," Cecily faltered out the words, "that you cared a little, Steve. It isn't only a matter of being given a part in your next piece. I'm very glad of that, but—but——"

Her voice trembled and broke, tears stood in her eyes—and Aldis hated tears.

"But, what?" he exclaimed almost roughly. Why on earth couldn't the girl behave sensibly?

"One can't be always an actress, you know," she faltered. "One is a woman in spite of oneself. I thought you cared for me, Steve. I suppose I was wrong." Suddenly she threw restraint aside. "Oh, Steve," she cried, clasping her hands together, "why did you make me love you?"

Tears rolled down her cheeks. Cecily's courage had broken down, the strain of the last few days had proved too great; she had reached the breaking-point.

The man threw his cigarette away, crossed his legs, and knitted his brows. It was really very aggravating, and this sort of thing must not be allowed to go on. Why couldn't Cecily behave like those other women whom he had kissed and was ready to kiss again?

"I wish you wouldn't be so tragic, Cis," he said, forcing himself to speak lightly. "Of course, I'm very fond of you, and when I'm fond of a woman I can't help letting her know of it. It's my nature. I've not changed towards you a bit, and if you don't fidget me with your absurd jealousy you'll find me just the same as ever. What more can you ask?"

She plunged her hand into the water, and then lifted it, dripping wet as it was, to her brow. "You are hard and cruel," she cried, "and you break women's hearts for your pleasure. You have won my love,

Steve—you can't deny it, that you sought to make me love you—and now you would throw me over because another woman's face has caught your fancy. And it's the face of a wicked woman, of one who will hurt you, who will kiss you to your undoing."

A shudder convulsed her frame. She stood erect, and spoke with a concentration of passion such as he had never suspected of her. Light, smiling, artificial Cecily! She had never even played at real drama upon the stage—but she was playing it now upon the broader stage of life.

"She has stolen you from me"—the words came from between her closed teeth—"and it's to her that I must give you up. Oh, that viper in human form, that snake-woman, how I hate her! How I hate her! But she shall never have you, Steve—never, never!"

Brutal words rose to the man's lips. This sort of thing was absurd, and must not be allowed to continue. Cecily must be made to understand that she had no claim upon him, no claim at all.

"I don't know why you should presume to interfere," he said, regarding her harshly. "It's nothing to do with you. We are not engaged."

The girl stared at him for a moment without response, then a moan, a deep, sobbing breath, broke from between her lips, and she sank down upon her knees beside the marble basin, her hands trailing over the rim of it, the fingers immersed in the water.

Aldis glanced anxiously in the direction of the group of people collected upon the further lawn, then, because it was not his way to be harsh with women, he stepped up to the sobbing girl and laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"Let's have no more of this nonsense, Cecily," he said. "You are foolishly, ridiculously jealous, and you

are making a tremendous fuss about nothing. Pull yourself together, my dear. Go indoors and bathe your eyes—you're a bit hysterical. Next time we meet we'll laugh together over this silly scene."

Cecily lifted her head and allowed a wan little smile to flutter about her lips. Unfortunately at that moment Zélie appeared upon the terrace, standing in the shadow of the ballroom window. She glanced up and down and then turned away. In another minute she would disappear round the wing of the house.

Stephen Aldis muttered a few hasty words to his companion, and was about to follow. But Cecily seized his hand, holding it tightly.

"Don't go!" she begged of him. "Oh, Steve, for God's sake, for the love of Heaven, don't go!"

But he wrenched himself free, and when the girl sought to grasp his arm, to hold him back, he thrust her from him, nor did he spare her the oath which rose to his lips.

"You're behaving like a damned hysterical fool, Cecily!" he exclaimed roughly. Then he turned on his heel and stalked away.

Cecily stood there by the fountain, the warm afternoon sun glistening on her flaxen hair and on her pale cheeks, unwontedly furrowed by tears.

She lifted her hand to her throat and choked down the sob that shook her. She watched Aldis as he crossed the lawn, mounted the terrace steps, and came up at last with Zélie. She could not distinguish their faces, but she was sure the dancer laughed—the cajoling, tempting laugh of a siren.

They stood a moment, and then, presently, side by side, they disappeared.

"I won't give him up to her!" Cecily cried aloud, and she raised her clasped hands as though she were

indeed pronouncing an oath. "She shall not triumph over me, that nightmare woman of evil! His kisses are on my lips—I can feel the burn of them still—and shall he kiss another woman's lips after that?"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE great drawing-room was well filled when the Selwood Manor party arrived at Chamney Castle that night. Fresh guests were pouring in, but Lord Martyn found time to speak a few words of congratulation to Owen and Lavender. He had already heard of the engagement, though it was barely a day old. There had been several callers at the Manor, to whom the news had been imparted, and, in the country, this kind of intelligence travels quickly.

"The best of good luck to you both," he said, heartily shaking them by the hand. "I feel almost like the fairy godmother. Yes, Mayne, I had your letter—I got it at the club. I was only too pleased to bring you and your aunt together. Just a happy coincidence, wasn't it? You're to be congratulated, my dear fellow"—he drew Owen a little aside—"she's as sweet a girl as the heart of man could desire."

"She is," agreed Owen.

"You'll have to back-water a bit now, though," smiled Martyn; "give up the frivolity of studio life and so on, what?" He was thinking of Zélie, who had been so anxious to know Owen's address. "By the way," he added, "you'll meet a Paris friend of yours here to-night—a lady."

"Shall I?" said Owen, but without interest. "You've got such a representative crowd, Martyn, that I dare say I shall meet a lot. But who's the particular lady?"

"You'll see all in good time," was the response. "I won't spoil sport by telling you. But remember"—Martyn shook a warning forefinger—"you're an engaged man."

He bustled off to welcome some fresh guests, leaving Owen to return to Lavender, who was already surrounded by a bevy of feminine friends all anxious to know how soon the wedding would be. He felt himself the cynosure of many eyes and guessed that he was being weighed in the balance. He judged that the general result was satisfactory—for the ladies smiled upon him—but this was no salve to his conscience, which was smiting him ridiculously, and he had a hateful feeling that people must read his duplicity in his face.

He had had this idea once or twice with Lavender. Her eyes were so pure and he could not always meet them as he would have liked.

The performance in the great hall was to begin at ten and was calculated to last a couple of hours. It was not a formal entertainment—people might come and go as they pleased. There were no long rows of seats stretching across from side to side, but comfortable chairs were scattered about the room anyhow. For those who preferred it there was a military band in the garden, to say nothing of the illuminated lake, walks and terraces; but the majority of the guests preferred to watch the performance, for rumours of sensational "turns" had been whispered abroad. The orchestra itself, under the control of the celebrated conductor Signor Cavini, was worth going miles to hear.

Owen and Lavender found comfortable seats in the hall, where they commanded an excellent view of the stage. Seated next to them was a prim dowager and her meek husband. The latter had apparently insti-

gated his spouse to accept the invitation, and she was making him responsible for the various shocks she had already received. All this while it was palpable from her keen, roving eyes and generally interested mien that she was enjoying herself immensely.

"To think of it," Owen heard her say, "that singing girl from the Star—what's her name?—Cecily Cuthbert, yes, that's it—here, and as a guest! And lots of others of the same kind. People we should feed in the servants' hall! Guests!"

"But, my dear Maria," whispered the man timidly, "Miss Cuthbert is quite a lady by birth. Besides, it isn't birth, you know, that is a passport with our host. It's cleverness!"

"People have no right to be clever unless they are well born," snorted the lady. "I call it impudent." She sighed. "I don't know what we are coming to in these degenerate days."

Robin, who, with Captain Ferrars and a girl friend of the latter's, was sitting just behind Owen, overheard, too, and broke into a sniggle. The dowager turned a supercilious lorgnette upon him until he succumbed. Then she placidly continued her conversation.

"And I hear there's to be a dancing girl on the stage—some French hussy—I suppose she's a guest, too. They tell me"—here she lowered her voice—"that she comes from some vile Paris haunt, and that her dancing is positively indecent. Well, I shall be able to judge of that after I've seen the performance right through."

The good lady settled herself in her chair with the evident intention of missing nothing and finding fault with all.

"Remember that you brought me, James," she said, "to see the improper dancing of a French drab."

Owen wondered vaguely who the French drab might be, but he had no suspicions. Programmes had not been provided, the entertainment being of so informal a nature. Besides, most of the performers were too well known in their particular line to need any introduction.

Silence fell upon the great hall when Signor Cavini, sleeker and more self-assertive than ever, rose, bowed to the audience, and then gave a preliminary flourish of his baton as a signal for the overture to commence. This had been specially composed by Lord Martyn, who was himself a musician of no mean order, and it was in many ways a remarkable piece of work.

For, in some subtle manner, it was suggestive of his own outlook upon life. To Owen's ears the music was a delight because of its weird contrasts, its quaint gradations of symphony, its union of the sublime and the ridiculous. One felt that the composer had performed his task with his tongue in his cheek. There were moments when the soul of the listener was lifted up by an exalted passage, only to be brought to earth again directly by a fantastic suggestion of some popular lilt of the day. Lord Martyn had done his share towards the unconventionality of the entertainment.

Following this introduction, turn succeeded turn, and every one presented its own surprise to the audience. Celebrities appeared upon the stage whose talents in that direction had never been suspected. There was Leonard Bryce, for instance, who had made such a brave fight for his party at the Daleshire by-election —he delivered a stump-speech that was remarkable for its wit as well as for its trenchant sarcasm of the Government, sarcasm that was cleverly veiled by his assumed character.

Gilbert Farrington, the artist, achieved success with

his lightning sketches of well-known personalities, most of whom were present to recognise and applaud the caricatures of themselves; Maurice Gothard, the pianist, astonished the assembly by showing himself almost as great a master of the violin; Marcelle Grelat, of the Paris Opera, sang *chansonettes* such as had been associated with the name of Berthe Montjoy; while the latter proved herself quite capable of shining in the higher realms of her art.

And so on—and so on. It was an entertainment at which the unexpected reigned supreme. It was a triumph for Lord Martyn.

Stephen Aldis and Cecily appeared upon the stage together, and were greeted as popular favourites. They sang a duet from the much-bepuffed *Golden East.* Aldis had decided upon this *coup* almost at the last moment, in order to convince Cecily of his sincerity when he had promised her the part of Maisie.

They appeared in ordinary evening dress, but the song had a haunting refrain which was bound to ensure its popularity. Unfortunately Aldis had not considered the sense of the words which Cecily would have to sing. To him a song was merely a song—that it should be made to have any personal significance to the singer was absurd. He could play an impassioned scene and remain cold.

It was not so with Cecily in the present excited state of her nerves. This ardent love-song was more than she could bear. Aldis, in his presumed character, had to clasp her in his arms and kiss her. And she knew he did it utterly without feeling.

"Love, will you crown me with roses,
Love, will you deck me with rue?
Come with your joy or your sorrow,
Love—so you be but true."

She had to sing these words. A silly jingle of sound, but it hurt her. In the second verse she broke down. If they had been in stage costume it might have been different—she could perhaps have dispelled the illusion that Stephen and she were acting. As it was she turned and saw him gazing at her tenderly and wistfully—a studied look which he had always found most successful, especially with the ladies of the audience—and she could not endure it. She sang a false note, then her voice shook painfully, she lifted her hand to her throat, and quivered to silence.

"I—I'm sorry. Forgive me," She cast an agonising glance at Aldis, then advanced, trembling, to the footlights, where she repeated her pitiful little apology. The audience broke into an encouraging roar of applause. She bowed, smiling wanly, then Aldis took her by the hand and led her off. The curtain fell, and the orchestra struck up a selection—but it could not hush the wagging of many tongues that had opinions to pass. Why, this was the sensation of the evening.

But Cecily and her collapse were forgotten when the final turn was announced, and the curtain rose upon a stage draped completely in black—fold upon fold, or so it appeared, of filmy gauze. The word went round that the new French dancing-girl was about to appear. Rumour had been busy as to her marvellous talent, but none knew her name. Owen, leaning back, asked Robin if he had heard it, but the latter shook his head.

"What extraordinary music!" Everyone was making the same remark. Some put their fingers to their ears. The violins squealed agonisingly, the bassoons wailed like the wind in storm, the drums thundered wrath or muttered a sullen defiance. It was the war

of the elements before they fell into their allotted places in a world where chaos reigned.

The stage was empty and dark as the world it portrayed. Then, subtly, the music suggested creation, and one could imagine—one could almost see—primitive man emerge from his cave, climb down from his tree and join in chase of the wild creatures that stampeded through trackless forests and across limitless plains. Yet, so far, all that had happened upon the stage was an increase of light—a pale white light that only made the darkness visible.

And then she came, lifting film after film of the gauzy background so that she seemed to be fashioning herself a shape from the mist of untold ages—Woman the temptress—the Zélie of an epoch when time knew no reckoning—Zélie, the same long æons ago as she appeared to the world of to-day.

She was clad in a leopard-skin, and the girdle about her waist resembled a snake. Her arms and neck were bare; so, too, were her feet and her legs to the knee. Her black hair hung loose, reaching below her waist. She advanced to the footlights, glancing fearfully over her shoulder to right and left as though on her guard against attack, then drew herself up and laughed. She was the Woman to whom, inscrutably, power had been given to lure men to destruction, who trod a path that was red with blood and sodden with tears. A crimson light played about her feet as she stood there—it was all-significant.

"My God—Zélie!" Owen half rose in his chair. He had turned deathly pale, but the great hall was in obscurity, so Lavender could not see his face at that moment. It was well for her that she could not.

Robin touched his shoulder from behind, and he sank back into his seat. He was breathing hard, like a

man whose throat is compressed. His finger nails bit into his palms, but he was silent.

Zélie danced as her savage prototype might have moved and danced. She was alternately stealthy and fierce, yielding and defiant. She was the woman who gives and at the same time the conqueror who takes. Those who watched her knew—for every movement had its suggestion—that men, naked and fierce, fought for her, and that she was the victor's meed. And yet her very embrace was a mockery—for she had no heart, no soul.

The curtain fell and the audience sat spell-bound. The orchestra continued to make weird music that told of the passage of time and of the development of knowledge. Melody, exotic and mystical, had taken the place of fantastic discord. It was the turn of man to create, and man had created unto himself his gods.

It was this which the second phase of the dance portrayed. Zélie appeared in the filmy drapery of classic times. She represented no character in particular—for time had not changed her—she was still the temptress, whom man had defied, she to whom sacrifice was made in secret groves, who received as her right the libation of her creators' lives. She was goddess and woman, Aphrodite and Sappho, shadowy exemplification of human passion and creature of warm flesh and blood. And still she was without remorse—for still she had no soul!

And the wonder of her dancing grew. She paraded the stage slowly, and it seemed as if the ghosts of all those whom love had tempted to folly trod in her train. The stage was peopled by a great company. The dancer threw herself down in voluptuous abandon or stood up mocking. Her arms were writhing snakes, her eyes shot living flame, her lips were stained with

blood. She led her phantom host to the gates of heaven—or hell—and vanished.

And so dance succeeded dance, and it was as if the audience watched the evolution of the world in its eternal slavery to the temptress. She was there always, though it might only be some subtle gesture that indicated her presence, and when the last phase commenced—the *"Danse du Néant"*—one felt that the Zélie of to-day had lived through all the ages, ever the temptress, ever without a soul.

In the obscurity of the hall Lavender slipped her hand into that of Owen, but found his cold and unresponsive.

"Oh, we are not all like that," she whispered with a shudder. "There are good women, too."

"It is an allegory," he muttered, feeling that he must say something. But, in truth, he had paid but small heed to the actual significance of the dance. For his brain was in a turmoil. Zélie was there—and he sat by the side of Lavender!

"An allegory of evil," murmured the girl. Then she was silent.

And in the meanwhile Bibi had appeared. It was not difficult for the spectators to build up the background of that dance—the *"Danse du Néant."* It was a defiance thrown at law and convention, an exaltation of degeneracy, a mockery of man's attempt to raise himself from the mire of his animal state. There was fierce cruelty in it and passion untrammelled. There was the temptress and her mate. And the background of the dance was a huge, looming scaffold.

Yet thousands had applauded that dance—laughed and wept over it according to their dispositions—thousands would applaud it again. Staid British matrons would see it because it was "the thing." They

would take their daughters, who would stare with innocent eyes and laugh in secret. The vice of it would be slurred over in the cleverness of the dancers.

It was this that Lord Martyn had anticipated—this that he was putting to the test. "What fools these mortals be"—that was the assumption upon which he acted.

And he had not misjudged his world. The curtain fell. There was a moment of intense silence. Then the duchess, who was sitting in the front by the side of Lord Martyn, clapped her hands.

"Wonderful—wonderful!" she exclaimed.

Her cue was taken up. The great hall rang with frantic applause.

CHAPTER XXV

Had Lavender been less innocent and unsuspicious she might have found food for considerable reflection in her lover's behaviour before and during supper that night. To begin with, he had deserted her during the interval between the performance and supper, an interval which Lord Martyn's guests filled up by collecting in groups and discussing the performance, by wandering out on the terrace, or by strolling in the picture gallery.

Everybody was anxious to know what everybody else thought of the entertainment, and Zélie was the prime subject of conversation. The duchess had approved of her, so the rest of the company approved too. Cecily came in for some notice as well; why on earth had she broken down? There were many who scented a scandal.

It had been settled, of course, that Lavender was to be taken in to supper by Owen. A little party had been arranged which was to include Robin and the Ferrars. But Owen had to be reminded of this, and he appeared strangely agitated when he stooped over to Robin and whispered something in the ear of the latter. Robin seemed disturbed too. Lavender noticed that as well.

He had answered in the same undertone; then he had turned to her and to Miss Ferrars, offering to take them for a stroll outside.

"I'm simply pining for a cigarette," he said, "and I'm sure you young ladies will like a breath of fresh air. Owen wants to speak to an old friend, someone whom he has not seen for ages. He'll join us again before supper is announced."

So they went out on the terrace, leaving Owen to lose himself amid the chattering groups of people that still lingered in the great hall. Lavender would have liked to ask him if there was any trouble connected with the friend he was looking for, but she did not like to, and Robin hurried her away.

Owen was telling himself that he must see Zélie—that was the one all-absorbing thought in his brain. Nothing else mattered. He must see and talk with Zélie.

Lord Martyn was there, standing close to the stage, receiving the congratulations of his many friends. Owen was conscious of a hum of conversation on all sides of him, and to his excited ears everyone seemed to be talking of Zélie.

"She's wonderful—marvellous—never seen such dancing in my life. It isn't so much what she actually does as what she makes one feel. I seem to have lived through countless ages in the space of a few minutes." So a grey-bearded, sallow-cheeked man, standing at Owen's elbow, was saying to his companion, a woman of uncertain age and keenly intelligent face.

Owen recognised them both. The man was Nigel Snow, the poet, while the woman was Mary Fordham, one of the most talented writers of the day.

"She's so clever," responded the latter, who always lived up to her reputation for saying smart things, "that I'm quite sure she must be wholly ignorant and uneducated. She couldn't dance like that if she studied much. The whole thing is spontaneous with her—a

sort of second nature. I hope she'll never study—she might become artistic, and that would ruin her."

Snow laughed. "There's a poem," he said, "in every movement of her. I could write a sonnet on the poise of her head. The writhing of her arms—I think I could express that best in a ballade. But as for all I've felt to-night—it would take an epic to do it justice."

It was the same thing on all sides, wherever Owen moved he heard Zélie's praises sung. It irritated and maddened him, for it seemed as if she, who was his wife, had given herself to the world; as if this success of hers, startling and unsuspected as it was to him, had separated her from him, made her independent.

"I can't live without her," he muttered between his clenched teeth, all the intensity of his desire for the lithe, feline creature, the siren who had enslaved him, returning in full force and sending the blood gushing through his veins. "Why, I don't know how I've existed all these weeks. Upon memory, I suppose, and the prospect of being reunited before long. Zélie, I've cheated and lied for you. I've sacrificed my soul at your altar. You won't desert me now."

A tall, languid young man, with a giggling girl hanging upon his arm, was standing by Owen now. Of course, they were talking of Zélie.

"Isn't she rippin'?" the man was saying. "I say, Hilda, I shall get introduced to-night, and when she comes on in London, as, of course, she's bound to, I'll be able to make the runnin' a bit."

"You're a naughty boy," responded his companion, "and you'll get yourself into trouble one of these days. Besides, I thought you were in love with me."

"Oh, you're different, Hilda," he retorted. "She's only a dancing-girl, after all."

Hilda smiled, showing her two rows of pearly teeth. "It's the dancing-girl who gets the best time, nowadays," she remarked. "I'd willingly give up being Lady Hilda and the privilege of making a bow to royalty, to have all London running after me as that girl, whatever her name is, is bound to. It must be just glorious to pick and chose one's men—whereas I have to put up with you, Edwin, and condone your infidelities, because it's supposed to be the right thing that we should be engaged."

She spoke half-jestingly, half in earnest. Owen turned and regarded the boy, for he was little more, with a scowl. The young puppy! How dare he speak of "making the running" with Zélie? It was to this sort of thing that she was laying herself open.

Owen was hot with suppressed anger. It had always been his pose to scoff at the world—now the world was mocking him.

He had thrust his way through the crowd by now, till he was standing close to Lord Martyn. The latter turned and saw him.

"Well, my dear Mayne," he remarked, giving a nod and a smile to the man with whom he had just been talking. "What do you think of my surprise?"

He linked his arm in that of his friend and led Owen a little aside. "It's perfectly ridiculous," he went on, "how all the men in the place are swarming round me, and asking to be introduced. And even the ladies—you see, the duchess has kindly expressed approval, and wishes to congratulate Zélie in person. And Zélie will put her tongue out at her when her back is turned—I'm sure of that. I'm glad you came up, as I couldn't get rid of Rathbone. The same thing, of course. Sixty, if he's a day, and with a grown-up family—he ought to know better."

Owen bit his lip, for the position was a hateful one. How could he who, not three hours ago, had presented his bride-elect to this man, proclaim himself for what he was—the husband of Zélie?

He felt that Martyn, though the latter had spoken lightly, was regarding him with something like a twinkle in his expressive black eyes. Probably, Martyn felt that Owen had the fever, too.

Yet he must play his part—the part of the mere interested acquaintance.

"Yes," he said, "I think she's wonderful. I congratulate you upon your find, Martyn. And it's quite true that Zélie and I are old friends, so I'm on the look-out for her in order to offer her my congratulations."

"I expect she'll be down in a minute," said Martyn: "In fact, I told her that I'd meet her here by the stage. So, if you wait, you'll be bound to see her. Don't make Miss Percivale jealous, though."

Owen's rather sallow cheeks flushed a trifle, then he quickly changed the subject and warmly thanked his friend for having brought about the meeting between himself and his aunt. "I've only just been told," he remarked, "that you've been at Chamney all the week. If I'd heard of it earlier I should have been over to see you."

Owen heartily wished now that he had done so. As a matter of fact, he had known well enough that Martyn was at home, but his natural indolence had prevented him from paying a visit at Chamney.

The two men talked together for a little while longer, and presently they were joined by Stephen Aldis. The actor appeared worried—Owen thought it must be on account of Cecily's breakdown—but he began at once to talk of Zélie.

"Wasn't she wonderful?" he said, enthusiastically. I'm happy to have been the first to congratulate her, for I was behind, of course. She said she wouldn't be long changing her dress."

He had hardly spoken the words when Zélie herself appeared. She entered the hall by a little door close to the stage, a door that was almost hidden by palms and foliage. She stood there for a moment, her white face and neck thrown into almost startling prominence by the heavy green of the background and by her elaborate black satin gown, a gown that was relieved only by touches of crimson almost fantastically inserted among the jet trimmings. The dress fitted like a glove, showing every line of the sinuous figure, while it was daring in its low *décolletage*. Zélie wore no jewellery save for the long pendent earrings of jet.

A murmur went up from the whole assembly as she stood there, and people craned their necks to see her better. She glanced about her with an almost defiant air, a look in which scorn and pride were mingled, then she advanced with the curiously feline movement that was natural to her to the spot where Lord Martyn stood with his friends.

She caught sight of Owen, and her eyes flashed dangerously as they settled upon him. She hardly removed them from his face as she stood there, receiving the congratulations of one after another. It seemed to Owen, as he gazed, that this woman was less than ever human; she was a soulless thing, a creature of a world of phantasms, a world that he had created from his own brain. For was it not his brain that had given birth to Zélie in the person of his siren of the mountain? She was as he had made her—evil, but he loved her—how he loved her!

Those red lips of her—lips which he had once com-

pared to a wound—they were smiling upon others now, and not upon him—maddening smiles; her small white teeth, why did they make him think of a vampire? Yet he didn't mind, so long as it was his blood they craved; and her eyes—they shone like gems upon her admirers, but him they pierced like living steel.

His turn came at last, Zélie stretched out her white hand to him, and he took it, bending his head and muttering some words of congratulation—anything that first came into his head.

She addressed him as she might a casual acquaintance, frankly and without strain. *"Comment ça, va, mon ami?* You are surprised to see me in England—here at Chamney, under the roof of my good friend, Milor Martyn?"

For the moment Owen was tongue-tied. What could he say to her, here, before all these people? And why did he instinctively feel that she bore him malice? Of course, he could not expect that she should greet him in any other way—she was showing quite exquisite tact—but, still—there was a threatening depression of the corners of her lip. It was a storm signal which he recognised. He had once stood with Zélie by the cage of a tigress in the Jardin des Plantes, and the beast had looked up at them from its meal—snarling. "Why, Zélie, that's how you draw your lip down when you're angry," he had said laughing. He remembered that now. There had been blood upon the tiger's jaw, too—just as there might be blood upon Zélie's—so scarlet they were.

"I must see you alone—we must have a talk," he found himself saying at last. "Can you spare me a little of your time—after supper?" Such trivial words—but how vital!

It was exactly what she desired. "Yes," she replied,

"after supper, with the greatest pleasure. M. Aldis will spare me then, I know. It is with him that I go in to supper. And you, monsieur"—her dark eyes were fixed upon him, seeming to probe him to his very soul—"you, no doubt, will be with your charming *fiancée?* May I, too, offer you my congratulations? I have heard of your engagement."

"Zélie!" Why should she torture him thus? What he had done was for her sake. He had told her so in his letter. "Why do you say this to me when you know"—he faltered—"you know that it is you and you only——"

She interrupted him, tapping him lightly upon the arm with her fan. "I know enough," she responded, "ah, but quite enough. We will talk of this again, *mon ami*—after supper."

She turned away to receive the congratulations of a small group of impatient admirers. Stephen Aldis was talking in an undertone to Lord Martyn, whom he had drawn a little aside. Owen hesitated a moment, then, since there was palpably nothing more to be done or said for the time being, he made his way, as best he could, from the still crowded hall, and, finding a refreshment buffet near the main entrance, he asked for a glass of brandy, which he swallowed at a gulp. Then he went in search of Lavender.

Meanwhile Zélie was still enjoying the homage of the assembly, so that Aldis and Martyn found themselves able to talk without interruption. The former had whispered in his host's ear that he had made an alarming discovery—he had opened the packet of letters which had been restored by Bibi Coupe-vide, and had found that two of the most important, the most damaging, were missing.

"That scoundrel has kept them back," he exclaimed;

"but he shall give them up—he must be made to give them up."

Lord Martyn frowned, for this was an unpleasant development, and anything which affected Lady Beatrice touched him very closely.

"Well, we've got the fellow safely in hand," he replied. "It's a good thing, after all, that Zélie insisted upon having him to dance with her. There are no suspicions in his mind, so we can afford to wait till to-morrow, Steve. Take my advice, and leave Bibi Coupe-vide alone to-night."

But Aldis clenched his fists and muttered something under his breath. The very sight of Bibi Coupe-vide was an offence to him. He had watched the Apache in his dance with Zélie.

"It will be a bad job for the hound if I run across him." That is what Aldis was saying. "I might be tempted to wring his neck."

CHAPTER XXVI

It was not till Owen had danced twice with Lavender —the two first dances—that he was able to tear himself away. The minutes had been like hours to him, and even unsuspicious Lavender had wondered at her lover's strange mood. He was alternately silent and talkative, becoming suddenly conscious, as it were, that his abstraction might be noticed, and striving to make up for it by laughter that was over-loud, jokes that were obvious, and hilarity of manner that was contradicted by the pallor of his sallow cheeks.

Of course, Robin knew the reason of this strange behaviour, and did his utmost, on his friend's behalf, to distract attention from it. But Robin was a poor actor at the best of times.

The two men met at the door of the ballroom when Owen was hurrying out in search of Zélie. He had exchanged a brief word with her after the first dance, and she had promised to wait for him in the vestibule. Of course, Lavender had questioned him innocently enough as to his acquaintance with the French dancing girl, and he had responded with some explanation hastily improvised. He had met Zélie at the studio of a friend of his, to whom she had sat as model.

Owen would have passed Robin without a word, but the latter caught him by the arm and detained him.

"You're going—to her, Owen?"

Owen nodded, shaking his friend's hand from his arm. "Yes; I must see her. It's necessary."

"I don't see why. For Heaven's sake, man, can't you remember what you owe to the girl you've promised to marry? Zélie is nothing to you now. It's the most infernal mischance that she should be here." He spoke with growing agitation. "Come back to the ballroom, Owen," he pleaded. "Remember Lavender."

But Owen was in no mood to listen to his friend. "Oh, for God's sake, don't prate to me!" he exclaimed, roughly. "I've no time to listen to you. I'm getting sick of your eternal sermonising, Robin. I'm not a child to be dictated to."

He shot an angry glance at Robin, and was gone. Robin stood there in the doorway and clenched his fists tightly as he watched the receding figure of his friend.

Meanwhile Owen had found Zélie. She was in the company of a young man whom he recognised as Sir Donald Ransom, but she rose at once when Owen appeared, evidently very much to the disgust of her companion.

"I say, you'll give me another waltz later on, won't you?" Owen heard him whisper. "It's perfectly divine to dance with you. It seems to make a man forget himself utterly, to take him into another sphere."

"It is Heaven?" she asked, with a malicious glance at him out of the corners of her eyes.

"I vow I think it's the other place," he responded; "but there are times when one is very near the other." The young man's face flushed as he spoke; then he scribbled his name upon Zélie's programme, bowed, and left her with Owen. She slipped her hand under the arm of the latter and drew him to the door.

"We'll go out, I think, *mon ami*," she said. She spoke the familiar phrase with an intonation which grated. There was such an utter carelessness about

it. "There is much that we have to say to each other, and I know of a quiet spot. We will talk when we get there."

She smoothed her dress and pulled up her long gloves, which had become a little wrinkled at the elbows. There was a great gilded mirror close to the spot where she had been sitting, and she regarded herself in it with complacency; to Owen's presence she appeared indifferent.

Yet this was Zélie, his wife. It was barely a month since they had been all in all to each other. Four short weeks—and yet he felt almost as if the whole width of the world divided them. And it was only to-night that this impression had taken hold of him; in his dreams she had always been near him, the Zélie to whom he had given himself body and soul, she for whom he had been ready to sin—for whom he had sinned.

What was the meaning of her coldness, her indifference? He would rather have seen her in a passion of anger—he understood her in that mood.

They passed out of the house into the garden. The sky was spangled with stars, and there was a faint glow on the horizon indicating the rising moon. The paths, between beds of fragrant flowers, were bright with the glitter of tiny lamps. The sound of music fell softly upon the ear. Owen followed where Zélie led. The touch of her hand upon his arm thrilled him, and as he walked he pressed it closely against his side. She offered no resistance to this, but her voice remained cold and impassive.

As a matter of fact Zélie was telling herself that the less said between them the better. She wanted no impassioned scene—there wasn't the smallest need for it—she knew all she wished to know. Had she not, that very evening, heard Owen congratulated upon his

engagement to Miss Percivale, the little waxen-faced saint?

She was leading this man to his death, and it was upon that that her thoughts centred. The knowledge of what she was doing thrilled every nerve in her body and sent the blood coursing quickly through her veins. This was her revenge, and she was revelling in it. She was leading the man who had scorned and mocked her to his death.

She knew that all would take place exactly as she had planned it. She had seen and spoken with Bibi since supper, and he was prepared. He would carry out her instructions to the letter. He would be there when they reached the summer-house, crouching hidden among the bushes. She would enter first and then detain Owen in the doorway. Bibi would creep out, unheard, unseen. A quick blow—like—this—involuntarily she clenched her fingers into the palms of her hands, and a shudder passed through her frame—yes, a blow with his own knife—and it would all be over.

Owen felt the convulsive movement of the girl's body, and he drew her closer to his side. "You're not cold, my Zélie?" he asked, little suspecting the true cause of her emotion. "You should have put something round your neck. We're still in spring, you know, though the nights are so delightfully warm. And you are really very *décolletée,* Zélie; a little too much so, don't you think?"

There was something of the old tone of command in his voice. He had always been accustomed to dictate to her upon the subject of her dres. But she resented his interference now.

"What does that matter to you?" she said, shortly. "It seems to me that a man who deserts his wife and

engages himself to another girl cannot have much to say in these matters. Is it not so, *M. mon mari?*"

Owen came to a sudden halt. They had reached the end of the illuminated walk by now and were standing on the verge of a thicket, a miniature wood intersected by several paths; in the centre of it the summer-house was situated. The sound of music could still be heard, but very faintly now. They were practically alone.

"But, Zélie"—a puzzled look had come to the man's face. "Why do you say this to me? Why do you speak so cruelly? Surely you know—you understand?"

"I understand—yes." She drew her hand from under his arm and stood confronting him. Since he demanded it, there was no reason why he should not know what she thought of him. Of course, there could be no doubt about his motives. He wished to marry his flaxen-haired doll for the sake of her money, and to remain on good terms with herself, Zélie, all the same. His passion for her was unabated. That was what he was about to tell her—he was going to throw himself upon her mercy. Well, she would allow herself the gratification of refusing him what he asked. She would speak the final "no" when they reached the arbour—just before the blow was struck.

"I understand that you have left me for another?" she said, in a low, purring voice, in which menance was hidden.

"Zélie, you are wrong," he cried. "Surely, surely, you read my letter?"

"Your letter?" She shot a quick glance at him.

"The letter I sent you by Robin. He delivered it faithfully?" A momentary suspicion shot through the man's brain. Had Robin deceived him—intentionally?

"Oh, that letter." She shrugged her slanting

shoulders. "I tore it up unread. I guessed that you were trying to excuse yourself, and I did not care to read your excuses. I knew enough."

"Zélie, my God, Zélie!" He seized her arm and drew her in the shadow of the wood, choosing the first path that presented itself. Zélie made no resistance—they were walking in the right direction.

Owen was speaking hurriedly, evidently labouring under great excitement. He talked half to himself and half to the girl. "Then you didn't know—God in Heaven, if I'd only realised that! You've been thinking me false to you—you've been hating me in your heart. I see that now—how you must have hated. You destroyed my picture, and I deserved that blow from you, just because I was a fool and hadn't told you the truth at once. Then I sent the letter to explain things, and I thought you would not hate me any more. I was contented in my mind about you and only looking forward to the day when we should meet again and be happy. And all the while—you never knew!"

"What is there to know?" she asked. They had reached a spot where three paths met. She directed his steps into the one that led to the arbour.

The man pressed his hand to his brow. "No wonder you greeted me so coldly," he said; "no wonder your eyes were fierce! My poor Zélie—and yet, if you knew it, I have been working all these weeks for you. Yes, my dear, I have been degrading myself, playing a blackguard game, and my only comfort has been that it is for you. And, all the while—you hated me."

"How do you mean—for me?" Zélie slackened her pace a little, compelling him to do the same. They were very near the summer-house by now, and his speech had mystified her. She wanted to understand.

He explained the plot upon which he had been en-

gaged, explained it breathlessly and with many pauses and interjections.

"You see it was for your sake, Zélie. I was a triple fool not to have told you before I left Paris, but I feared that you might be jealous and prevent me going. I vowed myself to perdition when I learned that you had found out and revenged yourself upon me by cutting up my picture. But I forgave you—for I know your nature, my dear. And now, Zélie, you see everything has happened just as I planned. I am engaged to Lavender Percivale, and to-morrow my aunt will make a new will leaving me heir to the best part of her estate. She can't live more than another week or two —it may only be a matter of days—the doctor has said so. She is so ill that she is not likely to suggest an immediate marriage between Lavender and myself, which I was afraid she might do. She is quite content, knowing us engaged. She will die, and then, of course, I shall break off the engagement. But the money will be mine and no one can take it from me. Then, Zélie, we can begin a new life together, you and I, and I shall not care what the world says of me, for I shall have you, and you are my world. We'll go away together—to some other country—and forget that we were ever parted, for, oh!"—he was standing still now, immediately facing the girl. He laid his hands upon her shoulders, his fingers biting into the white flesh of her neck—"for, oh, I want you so, Zélie! I have suffered without you. If you should refuse yourself to me I'd rather die at your feet than go on living. Zélie, my wife, say that you understand and forgive."

This was an unexpected development, and even Zélie's quick brain was unable, for the moment, to cope with it. She realised that there had been a mistake upon her part, and that, however much Owen Mayne

might have transgressed against others, he had sinned in order to provide himself and her with the money of which they stood so badly in need.

Zélie bit her lip in annoyance and indecision. She had nursed her wrath against this man till it had become almost dear to her. Besides, he had no longer any place in her schemes for the future. She wished to be independent—and yet, was Owen to die for that?

She had devoted him to death for an offence of which he was innocent. It is reasonable to kill one who has hurt you—but not when there is no injury to be avenged. Such was the primitive idea of justice rooted somewhere in the girl's brain. She recognised no law, human or Divine. This was no more than instinct, an instinct shared with the lower orders of creation.

And then this man had possessed her entirely—he was her husband. She had cared for him, too, in a wild, passionate fashion; it was not love, for that was an emotion to which she was an utter stranger. She had never loved any but herself.

Yet she had been about to lead him to his death! The murderer was lurking there even now, somewhere close at hand among the bushes.

Well, Owen must not die since he had not merited death. Zélie's reflections could not extend beyond that. This was no time for looking into the future. For the moment she knew only this—Owen Mayne must not die.

He was drawing her nearer to him, nearer. In another moment her head would be against his breast. She resisted a little.

"Owen, you swear to me that this is true?"

"I swear it—every word."

She was still resisting him, but he was the stronger. His arms had dropped from her shoulders now; they

were grasping her waist, enfolding her in a passionate embrace. Owen was regaining the mastery. It was his strength which she had always admired in him, his determination. She yielded now—because he was strong.

Their lips met, and to Owen it was as if he were absorbing new life into his veins. He felt as a thirsty man may feel, one who is parched and dying of thirst, when a cup of water is lifted to his mouth. What were the kisses of such a one as Lavender Percivale to this? For herein was life, the wild, fierce life of the flesh, and what did it matter if sin, degradation—death—lay behind that kiss, so long as it was given and received?

The glint of something white among the bushes—he could not say what it was, and it did not matter—caught his eyes at that moment. A recollection of the statue in the grounds at Selwood shot into his brain, but he dismissed the thought almost as soon as formed. Only a fool allows conscience to hurt him.

"Come, Zélie," he said recklessly, holding her tightly to him. "The devil first brought us together, my dear, and the devil will look after his own. I don't mean to let you go now we understand each other. There's some sort of an arbour close by here, I believe——"

The arbour—and Bibi! Zélie broke into a nervous laugh at the unconscious irony of the suggestion. Then quickly she disengaged herself from his grasp. How was she to rid herself—for the present—of this man, her husband, and let him go safely—the man whom, not ten minutes ago, she had pictured dead at her feet?

Her brain worked rapidly. She affected compliance. *"Bien,"* she said, "let it be so. We have still much to discuss together—about the future. But, first, Owen, I shall be pleased if you will go to the house and fetch me a wrap for my shoulders." She shivered artistic-

ally. "I feel the night air. I left a fichu with Mrs. Richards. You will find her easily. Go quick, and come back. I will wait for you here."

There was a rustic seat close at hand. Zélie dropped down upon it. "I dare not go myself," she added. "I have partners who would claim me. I shall be comfortable here—and you will not be long."

Owen hesitated, not liking to leave her alone—impatient, too, of every minute. But she pleaded again that she was cold, and so there was nothing for it but to do as she wished.

"You won't move from where you are?" he insisted.

She promised, and he turned reluctant footsteps away. Zélie watched him, half unconsciously admiring his tall, well-knit figure, till he had disappeared round a bend of the path, then she rose hurriedly and took her way to the arbour.

There was Bibi to be settled with, and what was she to tell Bibi?

She had not far to go, but there was a moment when she paused and looked about her nervously. The moon was above the horizon now, and its light, filtering through the trees, was pale and mysterious. She fancied she heard the sound of low sobbing, and of quick footsteps somewhere close at hand.

There were many paths through the thicket, and the trees were dense. Zélie strained her eyes to see between them, but could distinguish nothing. And presently there was the snapping of a twig, then all was silent once more. She told herself that she was nervous, and had imagined both the sobs and the footsteps.

She hurried on to the arbour. It was a small circular erection, with a wide door and a bench running

round the interior. There was no sign of Bibi. No doubt he was hidden among the bushes.

She was just about to call gently when, with startling suddenness, she was confronted by the figure of a man. He had emerged from the arbour, and in the pale moonlight he appeared white, dishevelled, and terrifying.

"Zélie, by all that's holy." He stretched out his hands and seized her wrists. She recognised him then with a little scream. It was Stephen Aldis.

CHAPTER XXVII

Stephen Aldis and Cecily had patched up a sort of reconciliation before the performance that evening. It was as a consequence of this, and in order to prove his good intentions towards her, that Aldis had arranged that they should appear together in the duet from *The Golden East*. He had, however, been intensely annoyed at her semi-breakdown, while his temper was not improved by the other matter—that of the lost letters—which was weighing upon his mind.

He had taken Zélie in to supper, and in order to keep up his spirits he had drunk freely of champagne—drunk more than was his wont—and the consequence was that he had risen from the table not intoxicated, but in a condition that made him hardly responsible for what he did or said.

He was an abstemious man as a rule, and without realising the cause of his peculiar frame of mind he wondered stupidly at it. He imagined that it was Zélie who had got into his blood, that it was by her he was intoxicated, and he laughed, seeing everything for the moment in rosy hue.

Zélie laughed also, but she laughed at rather than with the man. It was she who had encouraged him to drink. The supper was a merry one, and it reminded her pleasantly of the old Paris days. She had let herself go, and it seemed only natural that others should do the same.

Aldis danced the first dance with Zélie, and his exaltation of spirits increased. She found it difficult to keep him within bounds. She had to tell him in the end, jokingly, that she would not dance with him again unless he behaved himself more becomingly.

This brought about a change in his mood. He drank again at one of the refreshment buffets, remembered his troubles, and then, instead of rosy, everything appeared black before his eyes.

It was then, as he made his hesitating way back to the drawing-room, that his attention was claimed by Cecily. She had been on the look-out for him, and the dance which he had promised her was already half finished. He had quite forgotten all about it.

"Don't let's dance, Steve," she murmured, as she took his arm. "I'm tired. Let's go out into the gardens."

He thought that fresh air would do him good, and readily consented. But he would rather have had any companion than Cecily just then. If she were going to whine to him once more—well, he didn't mean to stand it. So he told himself under his breath. He had had enough of her ridiculous behaviour. And why had she made such a fool of herself upon the stage?—she had made a fool of him, too.

Unfortunately the quality of which Cecily stood most in need was tact, and it was in tact that she was peculiarly deficient. Her thoughts were too self-centred to allow her to recognise the irresponsible condition of the man. She had been torturing herself both because she had failed to do justice to the duet and because, in her jealousy, she had been watching Aldis almost ever since the curtain fell. He seemed to have studiously neglected her, while his attentions to Zélie had been so marked that others had noticed them besides

herself. She had heard laughing whispers, sniggering comments, and these had cut her to the heart.

She had not meant to reproach him, she had told herself that she would be gentle and ingratiating, and that the very force of her beauty should win him back to her. For was she not more beautiful by far—as she understood beauty—than the strange feline creature who had set a spell upon her lover? She utterly failed to see wherein Zélie's fascination lay.

And so at first there was nothing in her manner to which even Aldis could take exception. She was humbly repentant for her mishap upon the stage; she was not feeling herself, she had a splitting headache, she felt almost as if she were going to faint. Was he not a little sorry for her?

He said that he was sorry. He was ready to accept her excuses. It really didn't matter at all to him at that moment that Cecily had failed in her part. It was the picture of Zélie that absorbed him, Zélie as she had appeared in those wonderful dances of hers, the woman, primitive, passionate, and all-conquering.

He answered more or less at random, and sometimes foolishly, but, since he did not appear angry with her, hope began to revive in Cecily's breast, and, her whole attention centred upon herself, she failed to recognise that her lover had been drinking too freely—even though he stumbled once or twice without any apparent cause.

Fate willed it that she should lead him to the arbour in the wood, eager to have him to herself—quite to herself—for a little while. And he accompanied her with drunken docility, only knowing that the night air was cooling to his brow and that it would be fully half an hour before he might venture to thrust himself upon Zélie once more.

It was in the arbour that the trouble broke forth anew. Not all at once, because Cecily had begun by being very sweet and tender, knowing, perhaps, that Stephen Aldis was more amenable to a kiss than to any amount of reasoning. She wreathed her arms about his neck, rested her fair head upon his shoulder, and lifted her lips to his.

He responded readily enough, though he closed his eyes as his lips met hers. It was of Zélie he was thinking all the time, though she could not guess it.

She imagined that she had triumphed, that she had won him back. The soft, sweet perfume of the wood, of the garden, and of the spring night enthralled her.

"Ah," she cried, with a deep, throbbing sigh, "you love me, Steve, you do love me. It's all been a horrible dream, and I want to forget it. Kiss me again, my dear one, and tell me that it is I whom you love and not that evil creature, that vampire woman, Zélie——"

He opened his eyes. The spell had passed away. He gazed down at her stupidly with the dull comprehension of his semi-intoxication.

"What's that you were saying—about Zélie?"

"Oh, Steve, I want you to tell me that you've done with her for ever."

He broke into a rough laugh, thrusting her from him. "Done with Zélie? What an absurd idea! Done with her? My God, no! Why, she absorbs me. Zélie is a creature of fire and flame. I tell you that it takes a kiss from her lips to make a man realise that he is alive. You are all very well, Cecily, and I'm very fond of you"—his voice was almost maudlin—"but Zélie——" he lifted his hands to his lips and kissed them—"ah, for an hour with Zélie, I'd sacrifice the love of any other woman under the sun!"

His words fell upon the girl like a heavy blow. She

drew away from him, long shudders convulsing her whole frame. She buried her face in her hands and the tears welled from between her fingers.

"Oh, God, have pity upon me," she moaned, "for the man I love has none."

Aldis gazed at her stupidly and then attempted to convince her of the folly of her behaviour. But he found he could not articulate his words distinctly; they seemed to slip into each other somehow, and he could not say what he meant.

"Why don't you answer me?" he exclaimed at last, irritation getting the better of him. He had said nothing to which she could reply, but he was not aware of the fact.

Her face was still buried in her hands, she could not speak. She sat there craning her head forward, and the trembling of her shoulders maddened him.

He raised his voice almost to a shout.

"Once and for all, Cecily, will you cease worrying me about Zélie?"

Still she made him no reply. He was standing before her now, and he seized her arms roughly, tearing her hands from before her face. The sight of the tears streaking her cheeks only served to heighten his wrath.

"Why don't you speak?" He lurched a step forward and shook her savagely, hardly knowing what he did, only incensed against this white-faced thing who could shed tears but could not talk.

He released her at last, dimly conscious of having performed an act which in his sober senses he would have scorned. Cecily lay back upon the low wooden seat for a moment or two, gasping; then suddenly she rose to her feet.

"Let me go," she panted. "I hate you!"

He stood aside. "All right, go," he grumbled, "and

I'm glad to be rid of you. You're one of those women who can make a man's life a hell to him. It's all over between us, understand that—it's all over."

"I hate you—I hate you!" she repeated, pressing her hands to her swelling bosom. Her eyes were wild. The iron had bitten deeply into her soul. She swept out of the summer-house and was gone.

Aldis followed her to the door. He had only a dim perception of what had actually happened, of what he had said. Cecily had been playing the fool again and had irritated him. A curse upon these tearful women and their incomprehensible ways!

The pale moon, only recently risen, shone down upon the footpath, throwing long shadows across it. Cecily had disappeared, and this struck him as curious, for he could see down the path for a considerable distance in either direction. But, no doubt, there was some other way, hidden among the trees, which he could not see, or perhaps she had contrived a short cut for herself through the bushes. It was silly of her if she had done that, for she would spoil her gown, and it was a pretty gown, too.

Should he go after her? He was considering the question, balancing the weight of his body upon each foot alternately, when he perceived a figure approaching from the other direction to that which Cecily had taken.

Could she be coming back? She might have made some sort of a circuit and was now returning to say that she was sorry for having been foolish. Well, he supposed he would have to make friends again.

He drew back a little into the arbour. He was not going to allow Cecily to see that he had felt anxious on her behalf, so he told himself with foolish, half-drunken

cunning. The footsteps were drawing nearer—ah! they were now at the very door.

He stepped forward, and then he realised his error.

"Zélie, by all that's holy!" He broke into a laugh, and, stretching out his hands, seized the French girl by the wrists.

Zélie—for it was at this moment that she had reached the arbour after leaving Owen—gave a low cry, for she realised at once that the man was not master of himself. And what was he doing here in the summer-house alone?

"What a glorious piece of luck!" chuckled Aldis. "Why, the gods themselves must have sent you, Zélie. To think of it, that we should meet here and without a soul to interfere with us!"

His eyes were devouring her greedily. He was stepping backwards into the arbour, drawing her after him. His grip upon her wrists was so tight that it pained her. She was afraid of him.

"No," she cried. "It was all a mistake. I came here to meet someone—not you, M. Aldis. Let me go, let me go, I say."

She stamped her foot, but he would not let her go. He kept laughing in a foolish sort of manner, and he did not appear to understand what she said. He had passed one arm about her body now and was drawing her to him.

"I love you, Zélie. You black witch, you enchantress! You've possessed me body and soul, and you're going to tell me that you love me, too. You're not going to keep me in suspense any longer. For this is our hour, Zélie, yours and mine. You've come to me out of the night—it was fate directed your steps."

He continued to pour out hot, burning words, words

that were hardly intelligible. He was holding her close to his breast now, and his lips were close to hers. Zélie was terrified. She feared this man who had sprung, as it were, out of the darkness and seized her, this man who was too intoxicated to know what he did—she was afraid as she had never been afraid before.

Luckily he released his hold of her for a moment. He had stumbled and been compelled to throw out one of his hands against the woodwork of the arbour to support himself. Zélie seized that moment, and before Aldis knew what she was about she had fled from the arbour, leaving him once more alone.

She ran down the path, imagining in her terror that Aldis was pursuing her. It was not till she was clear of the wood that she remembered Bibi, who must be lurking there among the bushes, wondering what had happened. But she could not worry about Bibi now. He must find out for himself that there was no need to use his knife against anyone. There was Owen, too; but she would invent some excuse for him—he was bound to return to the house in search of her.

And so Zélie made her way back to the ballroom, and was soon claimed by one of her partners, who had been vainly seeking for her. By that time she had quite recovered her self-possession.

A little later Donald Ransom and Lady Beatrice, who had been wandering in the grounds, turned by chance into the narrow footpath that led to the summer-house. Donald had recollected its existence, and had told himself that it would be delightful to spend a few minutes there with his sweetheart.

They had been walking decorously in the illuminated gardens, but now, under the shadow of the trees, the young man slipped his arm about the girl's waist and whispered tender words in her ear.

They trod upon the soft sward by the side of the path, and so their footsteps made but little sound. The glory and the wonder of their love was upon them, and the things of earth seemed very far away.

"Here we are," said Sir Donald when at last the summer-house appeared in sight. "Come along, Bee; I'm not going to take you back to the house for another quarter of an hour at least."

"But I'm engaged to dance with Charlie Lake," she protested, smiling.

"Oh, bother Charlie Lake," he responded. "He must get another partner."

"Well, I consent," she replied, "on condition that you don't dance again with that horrible Zélie. I saw you flirting with her, sir, and I don't like it."

He pressed a kiss upon her cheek and led her towards the door of the summer-house, and then, as they were about to enter, Lady Beatrice suddenly gave utterance to a sharp scream, while Donald started and clasped his arm tighter about the girl as if to protect her.

For a white, ghastly face confronted them in the doorway, a face that seemed hardly human in its utter malignity—a frightened face, too—that of a hunted creature.

Donald recognised it, recognised, too, the stunted, ill-shaped figure. "Don't be frightened, Bee," he exclaimed, "it's only that beast of an Apache. What are you doing here?" He addressed Bibi sternly.

Bibi made a sudden dart forward, bending his head low—an effort to escape. But Donald caught him by the collar and held him firmly.

Then Beatrice, who, trembling and startled, had been leaning against the door of the arbour, screamed again.

"Donald, Donald, look!" She pointed a terrified

finger at a dark figure that lay there prone upon the floor, a figure strangely and horribly contorted. "It's murder, Donald," she screamed.

And Donald, still gripping Bibi, the Apache, tightly by the collar, looked and saw.

CHAPTER XXVIII

OWEN, failing to find Zélie at the spot where he had left her, remained for a few minutes, muttering to himself and walking with short, quick steps up and down the gravel path, then he realised that it was no use waiting any longer, and returned to the house.

He went circumspectly, for he was terribly afraid lest he should meet Lavender or Robin, who might claim his company and prevent him from having his talk out with Zélie. And he could not leave Chamney Castle that night without a complete understanding—it was impossible.

He found the dancer, at last, sitting among palms and flowers in the conservatory, and surrounded by a small bevy of admirers of both sexes. There was a great red-shaded lamp just behind Zélie's chair, and it cast its glow upon her white cheeks, and lent a *bizarre* shade of colour to the blackness of her gown.

She saw him, and she made a little gesture with her hand that was half apologetic and which indicated that, for one moment, she was not free to go to him. Owen noticed then that the tall, handsome woman sitting next to Zélie was none other than the Duchess of Shiplake herself.

He moved away and found a seat in another nook of the conservatory. It was only separated from Zélie and her party by a screen of foliage. Soon a man whom he knew casually strolled by with a pretty girl upon his arm, evidently on the look-out for a secluded

corner. He cast envious eyes at the empty chair beside the one occupied by Owen—here was an ideal spot for two—under the leafy palms.

"Aren't you dancing, Mayne?" he cried. "I didn't think you were the sort of man to be sitting out alone. Rippin' waltz this they're playing!"

The faint sound of dance music fell upon Owen's ears from the distant ballroom. It was a popular melody, with a banal, haunting refrain. He had danced to it a score of times.

Owen refused to take the hint, and after a few more trivial observations, the man and his partner drifted away. Almost immediately afterwards the duchess rose with a sweep of her skirt, and, of course, the rest of the company followed suit. The little party was about to break up.

Owen was at Zélie's side immediately. She was gazing at the retreating figure of the duchess, a sneer upon her lips. And, as the latter disappeared, she did exactly what Lord Martyn had foretold she would do—she put her tongue out with a gesture of derision.

"Ah, but they are funny, these good English people," she exclaimed. "They talk about art and elevating the public taste, but why do they applaud me, why will they come and see me, why?" She clapped her hands together and laughed. I have no art, I am as I am, Zélie of Montmarte. But I show them what is in their own hearts. If they spoke the truth they would say that my dancing shocks them and that they like to be shocked. But you English, you will not admit that you like to be shocked. You speak of art, and then it is all right—you have your excuse—is it not so?"

"Art or no art, Zélie, you are wonderful," said the man. "I wish to Heaven you were not, for then I

shouldn't feel that I was sharing you with the world. Oh, I hate this appearing on a public stage—must you go on with it, Zélie? Must you?"

He took her hands and drew her to the two chairs under the palms. "Now I've got you," he went on, breathing hard, "I'm not going to let you go until we've settled about the future, Zélie, my wife."

"Yes, we will talk," she said. "It is best that we should understand each other. And I am sorry, O-en" —he delighted in that pronunciation of his name— "that I could not wait for you in the garden."

"Why did you go away?" he asked.

She spread out her hands—it was quite easy to invent an excuse, anything would do. "Ah, I could not help myself," she said. "I did not wish to go away, but there came a gentleman—I have forgotten his name"—she shrugged her narrow shoulders—"and he told me that the duchess, she whom you see me with just now, wished to speak with me, and that it was most important, ah, but most important for my future. So what could I do but go? I knew that you would find me again before you leave, *mon* O-en."

His hand held hers. The air was soft with the perfume of flowers, and the music fell faintly upon their ears, a waltz to a fierce gipsy refrain.

She tapped her feet upon the floor. It was as if she longed to dance.

"You are dancing your way over the hearts of men, Zélie," he said, noticing the action. "Can you not be content with one heart—mine? Do you still love me, Zélie?"

"Why, of course, *mon ami,*" she answered, but there was no warmth, no passion in her tone. Nevertheless, she stroked his cheek with her soft fingers, and he

thrilled at the touch of them. "Do we not understand each other now?" she murmured.

"You will wait for me, Zélie," he said hoarsely, "until I have this fortune in my possession, this fortune that must be mine at no distant date, and for which I have sacrificed my honour? But that doesn't matter, for I'd have sacrificed my very soul, consigned it to hell, if it were to give you something you crave for. And you craved for money, Zélie. Well, I shall be rich, though for a little while longer I must still pretend to be the affianced husband of another woman. But, later on—ah, the whole world shall know that you are my wife."

"Let us wait till that hour before we decide on the future?" said Zélie, always ready to postpone in her mind that she would not abandon her stage career, that she would not give up one iota of her success, for the sake of this man whom, only a few hours ago, she had figured as lying dead, murdered, at her feet. She had spared his life, but he should not stand in her way. That was a matter, however, which could be settled later; for the present all was well, and, from the very circumstances of his position, he could not interfere with her.

So she leant back lazily in her chair, reaching out one hand and drawing down a great palm leaf so that it half-concealed her face. "We will talk of that later on, Owen," she said, "when the fortune is yours. Do not be afraid that I shall run away from you. But, for the present, you will not grudge me my success. You will be pleased that I am so clever—I, Zélie, who not so very long ago was ready to beg my bread in the gutter—that I am so clever as to win the applause of all these great people—Milor Martyn, who invites me to stay at his castle, and Madame la Duchesse, who

condescends to shake me by the hand, and who does not guess that I laugh at her in my heart. Are you not pleased, O-en, that I am so clever as this?"

Her red lips were parted; they smiled tantalisingly at him from behind the green fan of the palm leaf. He clenched his fists, cursing the evil fate that for a while longer must keep them apart. He was jealous of her success, jealous that other eyes than his should feast upon her weird beauty. Ah, it was different when he was painting the "Chamois Hunter." She was his then, only his. But he was ready to promise anything if the future was assured to him.

And, at last, a compact was made between them. Zélie gave her promise easily. Words meant so little to her, and weeks must pass before Owen was ready to claim her. To-morrow—what heed did she take of to-morrow? "To-morrow never comes"—the old saw rang in her brain. Owen had made use of those very words to her once, and had explained their truth. To-morrow never comes.

A born actress, she played her part skilfully. She pretended to be jealous of the little waxen saint, Lavender Percivale, to whom Owen had engaged himself. She knew now that she had no cause for jealousy; Owen's fidelity to her, the passion which dominated his life, was clearly to be read in every feature of his face.

"Very well, *mon ami,* let it be understood so. We part to-night, you as an engaged man, and I as the star of the London season. We play our *rôles,* each independent of the other, until such time as fate may bring us together again. Is that as you would have it?"

He bent over her. She could feel his warm breath upon her cheek. "Yes, Zélie," he muttered. "That is understood—because it must be so, and there is no

other way. But don't make me jealous of you, don't let me feel that anyone is taking my place in your heart. For I am your husband, and I would kill you and myself, too, rather than lose you, rather than give you up to another."

Zélie's eyes glittered. She thought of Bibi, who had said much the same—though Bibi's ideas of love were broader. But she estimated a man the higher when he treated her to threats—it was a method of love-making that appealed to her and which she appreciated. She had liked Owen at their first meeting because he despised danger. He resembled those primitive men—one had seen them in imagination as she danced—the wild men of cave and tree, who carry off their women after fighting for them to the death.

"And now we will go back," she said, "back to the ballroom, for they will be wondering where I am, and you, too"—she cast him a quick and mischievous glance—"the little pale saint with the flaxen hair, she will be shedding tears for her lover, the lover who has neglected her this evening. You will dance with her, Owen, and you will whisper sweet things in her ear, and she will believe you when you say that you love and adore her—and, of course, she will forgive. Oh, la, la"—Zélie lifted her arms, clasping her fingers behind her head. "But what a farce is this life! Men and women alike, we are not worth much, we all have the devil in us. I expect that your prim little *demoiselle* has been consoling herself for your absence—and why not? It is better to laugh than to weep."

A warm flush mounted to Owen's cheeks. He felt that he should have defended Lavender from such an accusation which he knew to be false. But, after all, Zélie was only giving expression to what he had always professed as his own views of human nature.

"Very well, we will go, Zélie," he said, "now that we understand each other. But my lips will be parched for want of your kisses—wife whom I may not call wife."

He bent over her and would have taken her in his arms and kissed her there and then, but she repulsed him, tapping him lightly on his cheek with her fan. She was minded to show her strength, to prove to her own satisfaction that, now and henceforward, she could bend this man as all others to her caprices.

And she did not wish for kisses, neither from Owen, who had the best right to bestow them, nor from anyone else in the world. She craved for wealth, admiration, and applause. She loved no other but herself. She had no soul.

"Go, kiss your little Madonna," she said. "Give her the cold, saintly kisses that she expects. If you went to her with my kisses upon your mouth your lips might burn her—and she would not understand."

"You are cruel, Zélie," he muttered; but he followed her, and together they made their way to the ballroom.

A waltz was in progress. Owen recognised the melody as that of the popular musical comedy in which Stephen Aldis had made his last success. There was a passage in it where the musicians hummed to the refrain. The dancers were showing a tendency to join in as well, and there was much laughter and some good-natured boisterousness. The more sedate of the guests had already departed, and the younger people were allowing their spirits to find a vent.

"Ah-ah-ah," hummed the orchestra, and "Ah-ah-ah," echoed the dancers, as they whirled madly round. Zélie's restless feet tapped the floor. She gripped Owen's arm. "Come, let us dance," she said, eagerly.

"Take me in your arms, Owen, and let us mock the world together."

He clasped her to him, holding her almost as Bibi Coupe-vide himself would have held her, breast to breast, and so they swung into the dance, and for a few moments, to Owen, there was no boundary between earth and heaven and hell.

Nor was he conscious of Lavender's pale face—Lavender, who stood there among the lookers-on, with Robin close beside her—Lavender, to whom only the day before he had promised love and fidelity—Lavender, who was pure and wholesome—Lavender, who did not understand.

"Ah-ah-ah" the orchestra was shouting now rather than humming, and "Ah-ah-ah" repeated Owen, laughing down into the eyes that were raised to his, conscious of the red, alluring lips, of the supple body which he clasped so tightly, of the heart that beat so close to his own. This was a delirious madness—it was worth living for.

Suddenly, in the midst of the refrain, the music broke down. Someone had mounted the stage and was speaking in a rapid undertone to the conductor. The dancers came to a halt, staring at each other and asking what had happened. Some shouted a protest. "Go on, go on!" One or two couples, with less restraint than the rest, went on dancing, despite the cessation of the music.

The man who had mounted the stage stepped forward, holding out his arm as though to indicate that he wished to speak. It was Gilbert Farrington, the artist, and he was recognised at once by his friends among the dancers, who shouted out his name, protesting loudly against his interruption. It was a moment or two before he could make his voice heard.

"I am sorry," he said. He seemed to feel the awkwardness of his task. "But our host has asked me to explain. There has been an accident, a terrible accident, I am afraid. I don't know the particulars of it yet, but I fear that someone—that someone has lost his life."

He brought out the words jerkily, though he was speaking in a loud tone of voice, so as to be audible from end to end of the great hall. A hush fell as the import of his words became clear. To Owen, after the noise and laughter, it was almost as if he had been stricken with sudden deafness.

"I'm afraid that there is nothing that we can do but withdraw quietly," Gilbert Farrington continued. "Our host has asked me to make this communication and to beg you to forgive him if he himself is unable to bid you good-night. I am sure that we must all sympathise with him in this disastrous conclusion to so pleasant an entertainment."

Gilbert Farrington descended from the platform to a room full of people that his words had thrown into confusion. But it was in whispers now that everyone spoke. "Who is it? Who has been hurt? How did it happen? Is he really dead?"

Fresh intelligence had arrived by now from other quarters, and it was not long before the name of Stephen Aldis was upon everyone's lips. Stephen Aldis was dead—some said he had been murdered; Stephen Aldis, whom only an hour or so ago they had applauded upon the stage; Stephen Aldis, the universal favourite, the darling of London audiences. There were many among the women who made no attempt to hide their tears, while one or two were led away crying hysterically.

It happened in the garden. He was found by Sir

Donald Ransom and Lady Beatrice Clewer lying dead —either shot or stabbed—some said one, some the other. The murderer was caught, too, after a terrible tussle with Sir Donald—he wasn't one of the guests, oh, no—a tramp who must have broken in from outside—there was a public footway close by. But no one knew exactly, and everyone had a different story to tell.

And then, as the hall was gradually clearing, a painful episode occurred. For—nobody knew exactly from whence she came—a wild-eyed woman, with her ball-dress in disarray and her hair loosened about her shoulders, came rushing across the room, her arms stretched out. There were few who recognised her at that moment as Cecily Cuthbert.

"Is he dead?" she screamed. "Oh, God in heaven, tell me, is he dead?"

Some kindly matrons closed round her and she was led away. But even when she was no longer seen her screams resounded in the ears of the shuddering guests, by now collecting in the hall waiting for the motor-cars and carriages that drove up to the door and then drove off again as quietly and expeditiously as possible.

Out in the gardens the fairy lamps were being extinguished, the Chinese lanterns torn down from the trees. But it was not till later on, when the last of the guests had departed and when the ladies of the house party had been sent up to their rooms, that a solemn little procession made its way across the lawn from the fatal summer-house in the wood to the main entrance of the castle. They carried between them an improvised stretcher upon which, reverently covered, lay the body of London's favourite—Stephen Aldis.

CHAPTER XXIX

THERE came a knock at Zélie's door some half an hour after that mournful procession had reached its destination, and when all was still in Chamney Castle.

Zélie had removed her ball-dress, and was sitting at her toilette-table, dressing her hair for the night. For the last few minutes, however, she had been resting idly, her elbow upon the table, gazing at her reflection in the mirror.

Her lips were set in a straight line, and it would have been difficult for anyone to tell what her thoughts might be. She was not grieving for the death of Stephen Aldis; he had meant nothing to her in her life, and she had only mocked at the passion which she had aroused in his breast. Only, as yet, she did not know exactly how he had come by his death, and there were uneasy suspicions in her mind.

Together with the other ladies of the house-party, she had been sent off to her room at the earliest opportunity. She had not seen Lord Martyn—she had seen nobody who could give her any information. From her window, however, she had been witness of the bringing in of Stephen Aldis's body; she had seen policemen, too, and, later, some time after the last of the guests had departed, another carriage had driven off, starting from the stables, and not from the front door. But as it passed down the main drive she had noticed that there was a policeman sitting upon the box.

Could it be possible that Bibi had been fool enough to make a blunder? She had not warned him—

frightened away from the arbour as she had been by Stephen Aldis's amorous overtures—so, supposing that Bibi, lurking there, had struck the wrong man, or, again, supposing he had been witness of Aldis's attempt to embrace her, and had been seized by a wild fit of jealousy?

Either one or the other was possible, and granted that it was Bibi who had done this thing, how was his mad act going to affect her future? That was the principal question, the only question that mattered.

"Bah," she exclaimed, grimacing at her reflection in the glass. "Let it be so if Fate wills. Why should I suffer? What was it that made my name in Paris, that brought me out of the slums? Was it not that men fought for me, shed their blood, and died? It was that that made people want to see Zélie the Snake. It was blood that made me famous in Paris, and it shall be blood that makes me famous in London." She shrugged her shoulders. "Let it be so, I care not," she muttered. "But Bibi—ah, the fool, the fool."

It was at this moment that a knock came at her door, and Madame de Freyne appeared upon the threshold.

"May I come in, Zélie?" said the journalist. "I'm far too troubled to think of going to bed, and I should like to have a little talk."

She had a dark dressing-gown of some rich material wrapped about her, and her steel-blue eyes were clouded, while her strong, rather masculine, face had little lines of trouble about the mouth.

"This is a terrible business, Zélie," she said, sinking into a chair. "I was fond of Steve Aldis. There's hardly a man in London whose future should have been as bright as his. And to die like this, to be murdered, when he was little more than on the threshold of his real life—oh, it's cruel, cruel!"

She passed the back of her hand across her eyes, which were wet. "We've had a terrible time with Cecily, too," she went on, "but she's quieter now, and perhaps will sleep. But I don't know—I don't know. She was like a mad woman for a while, and she said things"—the journalist shuddered—"which—which I should not like to repeat. I think there must have been some quarrel between her and Steve in the course of the evening, for no one seems to have seen her much after supper, though one of the maids tells me that she ran upstairs to her own room—oh, quite a long time before we heard about Steve's murder, and that her face was so white that my informant thought she was ill, and asked if she could do anything for her. But she only shook her head and flung herself into the room, locking the door behind her. She didn't come out again till she rushed down to the ball-room—you remember how she screamed." Madame de Freyne pressed her fingers to her ears.

"I am sorry for Mademoiselle Cuthbert," said Zélie, but without conviction. "But I think she was foolish, Madame Eve, and she did not know how to keep a man's love."

"Ah, Zélie, Zélie," said the other woman sadly, "I don't blame you—it isn't your fault that men are ready to sacrifice their souls for you, but it may be hard upon other women. Have a care, Zélie, lest one day even worse may befall."

Zélie only shrugged her shoulders, making no reply. There was no remorse in her heart, nor did she feel herself to blame for Cecily Cuthbert's agony.

"I've seen Harry," Madame de Freyne said, after a pause, during which she waited for that word of sympathy which never came. "Do you know, Zélie, who it was that struck the blow?"

Zélie was more interested. She turned in her chair, playing with a ruby ring that she wore—it was one which Owen had given her—twisting it round and round upon her finger. "No, I haven't heard. Who?"

"It was your Apache friend—the man who danced with you to-night—Bibi."

Zélie was prepared for the answer, but the corners of her lips went down, and for the moment Eve de Freyne, scrutinising her face, wondered what beauty men could see in it.

"The fool!" Zélie muttered. "The blind fool!" Then she put a sharp question. "He was taken, was he not? Has he given any explanation?"

Eve de Freyne shook her head. "He says he is innocent," she replied. "Yet he was taken almost red-handed. And he had poor Steve's pocket-book, his watch and chain, and other valuables, about his person. The man is a thief and a murderer. Yet he says that he is innocent."

Zélie's brows contracted in a heavy frown. Yes, of course, it was evident that the whole thing has been an abominable blunder. Bibi, believing that he had killed Owen Mayne, had been carrying out Zélie's instructions, taking the dead man's watch and chain and other belongings, in order that it might be thought that some tramp had broken in from the public footpath. And he had been surprised and captured before he had time to escape from the scene of his crime.

She drummed with her fingers upon the table impatiently. "Well, I am not responsible for Bibi Coupevide being at Chamney Castle," she said defiantly. "He did not come at my invitation. I did not even know that he was in England." She spoke the lie glibly. "It's true that when I saw him I suggested he should dance with me, but that is because I knew

that our dance would be the greater success. It was for the sake of art." She flung out the words with biting sarcasm.

"No one blames you, Zélie," said Madame de Freyne sadly. "Harry himself was the first to absolve you. But it is a terrible thing, and, from happiness and enjoyment we have been plunged into the direst sorrow and tragedy. And I feel nervous to-night," she went on, drawing the folds of her dressing-gown more closely about her, as if she were cold, "as though it were not all over yet, as though there were more horrors to come—oh! perhaps not immediately, but that they are brooding over us."

Suddenly she drew herself up in her chair. "Hush!" she murmured. "What is that?"

Zélie turned and listened. Both women could hear the sound of a footfall in the corridor without. There was an intense silence in the house, save for that one sound—light footsteps, as of bare feet, and they were drawing nearer to the door.

Madame de Freyne started up and laid her strong, muscular hand upon Zélie's bare arm. "Cecily," she muttered. "I am sure it must be Cecily. Who else should be wandering about the house at this hour?"

Zélie hunched her shoulders, but did not move. The doings of Cecily Cuthbert were of small importance to her at that moment. She was thinking of Bibi Coupe-vide, and if he would betray her.

The steps passed the door, and could be heard retreating down the corridor. "I can't stand this—I must see what is the matter!" Eve de Freyne, strong, level-headed woman though she was, was trembling a little as she spoke the words. She stepped quickly to the door and threw it open.

She saw the figure of a girl, clad in black, who was

on the point of turning out of the corridor into the gallery upon which it opened. There was something almost ghostlike in the way she seemed to glide along, and her arms were lifted above her head.

"It is Cecily!" Madame de Freyne turned an awe-struck face to Zélie. "I'm sure she's going to—to the chamber of death! She isn't in her right mind—she can't be! Zélie, I must follow her—for Heaven's sake, come, too!"

Unpleasing to her as was the suggestion, Zélie was constrained to comply. The two women followed quickly down the long corridor in pursuit of the ghostly figure.

They saw it again when they reached the gallery. This was a wide space which formed a communication with the more central block of the building. Here were the best bedrooms, and it was in one of these, as Eve de Freyne already knew, that the body of Stephen Aldis had been laid out; and it was at the door of this room that Cecily Cuthbert was now hesitating.

At that moment another figure appeared upon the scene. It was that of Lord Martyn, and he was still fully dressed. He, too, had evidently been disturbed by the sound of footsteps passing his door.

Cecily turned and cast a half-frightened, half-defiant glance at her pursuers. A grey light was filtering in from a high, uncurtained window—the light of dawn.

She had entered the room before they could come up to her, the great oak-panelled room, with its sombre hangings, its closely-drawn curtains, and the old-fashioned four-post bedstead upon which lay the dead man. Four tall candles were burning upon the mantelpiece.

When Lord Martyn, followed by the two women, in

his turn entered the room, it was to see Cecily upon her knees by the bed, her arms stretched out, her face buried in them, her blonde hair streaming over the white sheet. Her whole body was convulsed with sobs.

Martyn touched her very gently upon the shoulder. "Cecily,' he said, "you must go back to your room. This is no place for you, and it can do no good either to him who is dead or to yourself."

She lifted her head and regarded him fiercely. She did not seem to perceive the two women who stood huddled together upon the threshold.

"Leave me alone!" she cried wildly. "Leave me with my dead! I must watch by his side!" They could hear her teeth chattering. "I must watch and pray!" she moaned, "watch and pray!"

Eve de Freyne stepped forward pityingly, and with gentle speech. But her movement betrayed the presence of Zélie to Cecily Cuthbert. She sprang to her feet, and at that moment she was no longer a soft-haired, soft-voiced English girl—she was a fury unloosed, and every quiver of her body was a denunciation.

The filmy black dress she wore had slipped down from her white shoulders, exposing the exquisite contour of neck and breast; her arms, bare too, were stretched out straight before her, the fingers extended and pointed at Zélie.

"You—you!" she screamed. "Have you come to look upon your handiwork—to gloat over your victim? See, then! See!"

Before she could be restrained she had torn the sheet from the dead man's face, the ashen face that yet, in death, preserved its beauty.

Cecily gripped Zélie by the arm, and despite her

resistance dragged her forward. At that moment she had the strength of a madwoman.

"Murderess! murderess!" she cried. "You killed this man as surely as if your own hand had struck the blow! Here, in the presence of the dead, I accuse you! His blood is upon your head! Lift up your hands and let us see the hue of them! Ah! you dare not! you dare not!"

With an hysterical cry she seized one of Zélie's hands, and held it up, and, strangely—almost as though it were an omen—a ray of light, a first ray of the rising sun, shot across the room, stealing in from between the closed curtains, and it fell upon Zélie's outstretched hand, tingeing it red. It was but the effect of a moment, but Cecily broke into a fierce laugh.

"You see! you see!" she cried. "The answer has come direct from Heaven!" She flung Zélie's hand away from her, and then fell back, moaning, into the arms of Eve de Freyne.

"She is mad!" said Zélie, between her teeth, as Eve picked up the girl in her strong arms, even as she might a child, and carried her from the room.

"Yes, she is mad—mad with grief—and does not know what she says," responded Martyn. But later, after he had conducted Zélie to her room, he returned to the death chamber and stood gazing down at the white, upturned face of the man who had been his friend.

"Yes, there is blood upon the panther's claws," he muttered, "the panther that I let loose to prey upon the world. It has begun even sooner than I expected."

He clasped his hands together and fell upon his knees. "Forgive me, Steve," he prayed, "and pity me—for I am punished!" He lowered his voice almost to a whisper. "But one day you will be avenged —for the panther rent its master, too!"

CHAPTER XXX

The omnibus rattled and rumbled over the hard road on its way back to Selwood Manor, and its occupants, for the most part, were very silent.

Lavender's head rested against her lover's shoulder, and her hand clasped his. But she found him cold and unresponsive, and it seemed as if her own heart were chilled too. Of course, they were, one and all, upset by the terrible tragedy which had brought the entertainment to so untimely a close. But Lavender wanted comforting so badly, yet Owen sat there silent, his lips compressed together, and she felt that his thoughts were far away.

The rest of the party had been less restrained during the early part of the drive. They had discussed the murder, and had now and then appealed either to Lavender or to Owen. None of them knew Aldis at all intimately, and so they had no personal cause for sorrow.

The dawn was breaking, a grey and misty dawn, and the trees on either side of the road looked white and ghostly.

There was a brief pause at the Ferrars' cottage, then the omnibus rattled on again till it reached the gates of the long avenue leading to Selwood Manor.

The groom opened the gate, and the omnibus turned in; a few more minutes, now, and the interminable drive would be over.

Suddenly, when they were almost at the end of the avenue, close to the spot where the trees on either side gave place to lawns, there came a jolt, a shock,

and the three occupants of the omnibus were almost thrown from their seats.

The coachman backed the omnibus, and shouted to his horses. Both of them appeared frightened, and were restive. One had nearly fallen, being only just pulled up in time.

Owen threw open the door and sprang out. Then he helped Lavender to alight. Robin followed.

"What is the matter?" It was still dark in the avenue, though only a few yards further on the lawns appeared white and shimmering in the dawn. Owen addressed the coachman, who, by now, with the assistance of the groom, who had run to their heads, had nearly mastered the horses.

"Can't make it out, sir," was the reply. "One would have thought that the horses had stepped upon something, but there's nothing in the way that I can see."

Owen's eyes swept the ground, then he advanced a few paces. Suddenly he stumbled and fell.

He was on his feet again in a moment. "Take care!" he said to Robin, who was following him.

Then he stooped down and examined a wire that was stretched taut across the road, and at the level of a few inches above it.

He knew what that wire indicated. So did Robin, who by now was at his side.

"My, God, Robin! There have been burglars at the Manor!" muttered Owen.

With a jerk of his powerful wrist Robin tore down the wire, and then, after a swift glance at Lavender, a glance that expressed the deepest concern, he set off at a run for the house. It was distant only a couple of hundred yards or so. He reached the front door before the omnibus, with Owen and Lavender, could drive up.

He had had a premonition of evil, to all appearance absolutely unreasonable, ever since leaving the castle, and now the feeling had utterly possessed him. Thieves had broken into the Manor—of that there could be no doubt—but there was more mischief in the wind than mere theft. Robin was sure of it, though he could not have explained why.

Owen had the same fear, for it was as if there was some strange telepathic influence at work that night; but for Lavender's sake he refrained from giving any expression to it. He consoled the girl as best he could. He would have concealed from her the interpretation which Robin and he had placed upon the obstruction in the way, but she had overheard their mutual exclamation.

"Yes—there have been burglars. I don't think there can be any doubt of it, but they've got away, undisturbed, long ago. See! Dawn is breaking. It just means a loss of the silver. Probably the household has slept quietly through it. Your aunt will know nothing till we tell her."

He repeated the last phrase once or twice, as if to reassure himself. Yet he felt the heart within his breast clasped as in a vice, and it seemed as if an icy hand was compressing his brow. Supposing some terrible mishap had befallen his aunt—what then? His conscience tortured him. Morning was breaking with a lurid light, the tree tops swayed and rustled ominously, and from somewhere in the distance a dog howled. He seemed to smell death in the air.

He opened the door hurriedly with his key, and they entered the hall. Robin had found another wire stretched just across the porch, and this, too, he had torn down. Within all appeared in order. The great central lamp gave a feeble glow of light—it had been

left burning in case the party returned before dawn. The windows were closely shuttered, and the whole aspect of the place was cold and ghostly, but nothing had been disturbed—the thieves had not passed that way.

Lavender would have run straight to Mrs. Alderson's room, but was prevented by Robin, who had taken command of the proceedings. He agreed with Owen that the old lady should not be disturbed unless it were necessary; in the state of her heart, a sudden alarm might have serious consequences.

So Owen remained with Lavender in the hall while Robin went to arouse Hicks, the butler, and to find out where the thieves had obtained an entry, and the extent of their depredations.

"I dare say they've confined their attentions to the pantry," he said, for Lavender's benefit.

"Oh! but that isn't likely!" faltered Lavender, who was pale with alarm and apprehension. "There's the jewellery. The burglars must have heard of mother's pearls and diamonds—the heirlooms. She keeps them in the little boudoir that adjoins her bedroom—there's a safe there, you know." She wrung her hands despairingly. "Oh! my dear mother! If she has been disturbed in such a way—in the middle of the night—the shock must have killed her!"

Owen listened at the foot of the stairs, but there came no sound from above.

"No alarm has been given," he said, with an affectation of cheerfulness. "Everyone seems to be asleep. And the less noise we make ourselves the better. Why, we might be taken for the thieves!" He forced a laugh.

Lavender was bitterly repentant for having gone out that night. "There is no one else who sleeps any-

where near mother's room," she said despairingly. "I wanted her to have Mamey with her, as I should be away, but she wouldn't. You see, my bedroom is just on the other side of the boudoir, so that I could always be called if I was wanted."

After a few moments, Robin, who had hurried off on his errand, returned. His face was very grave.

"They got in by a window near the kitchen," he whispered hurriedly. "The glass has been broken and the shutter forced. The pantry has been ransacked. They have been upstairs, too; I can see the marks of their boots on the back staircase. And Hicks is not in his room."

The two men glanced at each other, then Robin, without further word, led the way to the first floor of the house, where he turned off into the wide corridor where Mrs. Alderson's room was situated. Owen and Lavender followed on tiptoe. The groom, who had hurried back to the house after helping the coachman with the horses, remained below, ready to answer if he was called.

It was quite silent in the corridor. The morning light streamed in through a red-stained glass window at the far end. But one or two doors that should have been shut stood open, and once Robin pointed to marks of muddy footprints on the soft, rich carpet.

The door of Mrs. Alderson's room was shut, as was that of the adjoining bedroom. It was outside the latter that the little party came to a halt. They listened breathlessly before turning the handle.

"There's someone here!" whispered Owen in Robin's ear. "I'll swear I can hear deep breathing!" He laid a detaining hand upon Lavender's arm. "Stay where you are, dear," he entreated. "Don't go in!"

But she disregarded this injunction altogether. She

pushed her way past the two men and flung herself into the boudoir. Then she uttered a sharp cry.

The room was in disorder. Chairs and tables were overthrown, and there were all the signs of a violent struggle. The door of the safe stood open, and boxes and papers were littered upon the floor. A lantern, such as the burglars might have used, was still burning upon the top of the safe, and a candle lay by the side of a heavy brass poker upon the carpet, in the middle of the room.

Propped up against the wall, bound and gagged, was Hicks, the butler. He appeared to be only half conscious. His hair was matted on his forehead, and there was a red stain on one of his cheeks. His lips were swollen, and his face congested; he was breathing with difficulty because of the gag that had been thrust into his mouth.

Robin was at his side in a moment, cutting the thongs that bound him. But Lavender, after her sharp cry, had run straight into the adjoining room, that of Mrs. Alderson, the door of which stood wide open. A few seconds later another scream escaped her lips.

Owen joined her, and together they stood in speechless agony—though there was a very different foundation for the suffering of each—by the bedside of a dead woman.

Mrs. Alderson lay there on the outside of the bed. She wore a dressing-gown—one of the dainty, lavender-perfumed confections that she affected—and the silken quilt had been drawn up over her body. She lay on her back, and her hands were folded across her breast. Her eyes were closed, and the whole aspect of her face was peaceful. Lavender had imagined at first that she was asleep, and her heart had leapt

joyfully; then she had touched the pale cheek, and understood.

Owen laid his hand for a moment upon his aunt's breast, then he readjusted the quilt, and, taking Lavender by the arm, led her gently away. For this was a chamber of death.

In the boudoir, Hicks was coughing and gasping back to consciousness. Lavender herself, despite her own trouble, and her streaming eyes, ministered to him as well as she could. The groom had already been despatched to Selwood to notify the doctor and the police.

And before long the butler was able to tell what had happened. A stiff dose of brandy brought him round, and he managed, with Robin's help, to walk down to the hall, where they all remained, with the exception of Lavender, till the assistance summoned from the little town should arrive. Lavender, at Owen's urgent request, had retired to her own room, where she could mourn for her dead undisturbed.

"I woke up, gentlemen," said Hicks huskily, "to hear the fellows creeping upstairs. They must have made their way straight to the boudoir after breaking in; knew just exactly where to go, they did. I didn't know what to do, and I hadn't got any sort of arms. I took up the first thing that came handy—the poker—and I went after them, poker in one hand, candle in the other. I felt dazed-like, and hadn't a plan in my head. You see, sirs, we've never had nothing of the sort before."

The butler spoke apologetically, as if he had an idea that he might be held responsible. "They were in the boudoir when I got upstairs," he went on, "and, without waiting to think whether I was doing right or wrong, I threw open the door. I was mortal fright-

ened, gentlemen, but I had to do it. You see, there was Mrs. Alderson, who might be in danger—and she's always been a good mistress to me. And now, only to think of it, she's dead—she's dead!" He broke off to rub his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Well, I was seized in a moment," he continued. "There were two of them—big, tall fellows—I could swear to them again—and they had already got to work on the safe. I suppose it was about two o'clock in the morning. I made the best fight I could, but of course it was all against me. One of them had a revolver, and threatened to fire, but evidently didn't want to do so. They got me down, and began to bind me. It was just then that the door of Mrs. Alderson's room opened, and she herself appeared. She was in her dressing-gown, and so quiet and calm you'd never have believed it.

"'Don't hurt him!' that's what she said, and her voice was as gentle as if she had been speaking to you or me. 'Since you have broken into my house to steal,' she went on, 'take what you want, and go quietly.' Then suddenly she pressed her hands to her heart and sank down—without a cry or a groan—it must have killed her to be aroused so roughly by the noise that was going on in the next room to hers. Well, one of the men went to her, while the other finished binding me up. I heard him say that she was dead. They made no further noise, and, as you know, gentlemen, not another soul in the house was aroused. When I was quite helpless they propped me up against the wall, and then they went and carried Mrs. Alderson gently—I'll say that for them—to her bed. Afterwards they came back, forced the safe, and cleared it out, and then they stole quietly away. One of them forgot his lantern. Any other room they went to

must have been visited afterwards. And so I was left alone, with my dead mistress in the next room, the rope cutting into my flesh, hardly able to breathe for the gag, and the blood trickling from a blow on the head which one of the fellows had given me. It was awful, Mr. Mayne, sir"—Hicks passed a trembling hand over his brow—"and the time seemed to crawl—I could hear the stable clock, you know—but at last I must have partly lost consciousness, for I remember nothing more until you gentlemen came."

Dr. Murray arrived soon after the story was concluded, but all that remained for him to do was to verify the death of Mrs. Alderson and express his sympathy—which he did in no measured terms. Mrs. Alderson was a woman whom all the county would mourn. Few had been so universally beloved as she.

Owen played his part, both with the doctor, and, later on, with the police. There was no rest for him that night. But when at last he found time to go to his own room to change his clothes he gazed at his reflection in the glass, and wondered at what he saw

For all the gay *insouciance* of the Owen Mayne of Paris days seemed to have passed away. To himself he looked and felt an old man. His face was blanched and haggard, his eyes had lost their lustre. At the moment it seemed as if the mirror was reflecting his soul to him—and his soul was ugly and foul and mean.

"She is dead—and the old will is still in force," he muttered. "Every penny is Lavender's—nothing mine. And Lavender would give it to me, but, for that, I must——"

He smote his cheek heavily with his open palm. "Blackguard! blackguard!" he cried. "The devil is paying you the wages of your hire!"

CHAPTER XXXI

It was the day after the funeral, as impressive a funeral as the county had ever witnessed. All the neighbourhood, rich and poor alike, had trooped to Selwood to pay the last tribute of respect to the good woman who had always placed the wants and the sufferings of others so far above her own.

Among those present was Lord Martyn, who himself had come from a house of mourning. For Stephen Aldis still lay dead at Chamney Castle, though his body was to be moved that night and conveyed in a special train to London, where the funeral would be held on the morrow. There had, of course, been an inquest, and the unanimous verdict of the jury was one of murder against the prisoner—Bibi Coupe-vide. There were some in court who maintained that the Frenchman's appearance, his demeanour—even his absurd name—were enough to convict him, even if the evidence were not so strong. And yet he still had the face to deny his guilt!

The events at Chamney and Selwood had provided the county with inexhaustible themes of conversation and gossip. Lord Martyn's wonderful entertainment and its tragic ending, of course, took precedence. It was said—even as Zélie had expected—that the murder was really due to jealousy; that the Apache had seen the dancing girl in too intimate converse with the popular and handsome actor, and that he had

avenged himself after the manner of his kind. This story was in contradiction to that officially put forward—the tale that Lord Martyn himself had told at the inquest—which maintained that Stephen Aldis had been incensed against the Frenchman because of certain letters—details as to which were not considered necessary to the case—letters that the Frenchman had in his possession, and refused to surrender. It was suggested that hot words had passed, leading up to the final tragedy. Aldis had threatened—so Lord Martyn testified—to break the fellow's neck. Therein, no doubt, lay the provocation to the fatal blow. The fact that the murderer had removed the dead man's watch and other effects did not prove that robbery was the first temptation; it was assumed that Bibi's natural cupidity had come into force as soon as his victim was lying dead at his feet.

The story told by Bibi himself, through an interpreter, was a ridiculous one, so all who heard it agreed. He maintained that he had come upon the scene after the murder had been committed. He had found the body lying in the summer-house, and had bent over it to ascertain if the man were really dead. Finding that he was, Bibi had succumbed to the temptation of removing whatever valuables he might find in the pockets. It was while he was doing so that he had been interrupted by the appearance of Sir Donald Ransom and Lady Beatrice Clewer.

Of course, this version of the affair was absurd. For what had taken Bibi Coupe-vide to the arbour, in the first instance, and who else was there who would have dreamed of doing so popular a man as Stephen Aldis to death?

Someone who had broken in from without, so it was suggested on Bibi's behalf. The fence was dam-

aged, and there were footmarks on the soft earth by the side of the path outside—also, the grass had obviously been trodden down. But all this evidence was turned against the prisoner. It was shown that his coat bore green stains acquired from the fence, and his boot fitted exactly in the footprints. This all went to show that he had made deliberate efforts to avert suspicion from himself, and only served to blacken the case against him.

Of course, Lord Martyn's house party had broken up on the day following the murder. Some sympathy was expressed for him, but there were many who shook their heads, and regarded him as the chief cause of the calamity. "The idea of having such a creature in the house!" declaimed outraged propriety, lifting horrified hands. "But, then, the man makes a point of offending the feelings of his neighbours."

Owen was in a sullen frame of mind those days, and could not help his mental disturbance showing itself upon his face. He carped bitterly at fate for having played him so falsely. While other men regarded him as an object of envy—the accepted lover of so beautiful and wealthy a girl as Lavender—he himself—and for good reason—regarded his position as utterly hateful and unendurable. He could not even temper it with that cynicism which had borne him through other troubles in the old Paris days. And, of all things, he hated most having to be with Lavender in her grief, having to comfort her, having to play the *rôle* of her lover. Every kiss, every embrace, was to him a torture devised by some devil for the racking of his nerves. He could always hear the mocking laugh of the imp perched upon his shoulder whenever Lavender leaned her head against his breast in her desire to find solace for her tears.

Once she spoke of her inheritance. The substance of the will was already known, for Mr. Jerrold, the solicitor, had come, as was arranged, to Selwood Manor on the day following the burglary, only to find that no fresh disposition of the property was now possible.

"But it doesn't matter, dear, does it?" Lavender whispered. "You know that what is mine is yours, and when we are married you shall have the control of everything."

"When we are married!" The biting irony of it! It must be another six months at least before marriage could be thought of, and in the meanwhile how was it possible—even if he could bring himself to suggest it—to get Lavender to transfer her fortune to him? She had placed her affairs in the hands of Mr. Jerrold, a kindly, white-haired old gentleman, who had acted for the Aldersons for the last twenty years, and he would naturally raise objections to a gift pure and simple, even of part of the estate, and would insist that any fresh arrangement should be by way of marriage settlement.

He avoided Lavender as much as he could in those days that preceded the funeral, but this only threw him into the company of Robin, who irritated him beyond measure by his way of talking cheerily of the fortune, and his palpable avoidance of any subject that might suggest the name of Zélie. There were times when Owen, goaded to a pitch of exasperation, could have turned upon his friend and cursed him—it was with difficulty that he held himself in check, and his bad temper was only too obvious.

By the advice of the solicitor, Lavender had invited a relation of her own, a certain Mrs. Foxhall, a cousin of her mother's, to come to the Manor and

fill the necessary *rôle* of chaperon. Mrs. Foxhall had duly arrived, happy, since she was a poor woman, at the good fortune which had thrown such a position in her way. She was a lady of comfortable proportions, who made a point of agreeing amiably with everything that everybody said. Owen hated her from the first, and she was obviously afraid of him.

Upon the day following the funeral, in the course of the afternoon, Robin found Lavender alone in the garden, and there were tears in her eyes, which she did her best to wipe away when she saw him coming. A few minutes earlier he had espied Owen hurrying across the lawn, walking with long strides, his head bent, and now, finding Lavender so tearful, Robin began to suspect that something must be wrong.

But she would not take him into her confidence at first. She tried to talk of ordinary topics, but the effort was a pitiful one. Robin thought how sad she looked, and yet how inexpressibly pure and lovely, in her black gown. What a contrast to Zélie, who affected black for choice! Robin figured them both as "night," and in his mind's eye he saw the French girl as the representation of some horrible and terrifying dream; while Lavender, she was night at its holiest, soft and dewy and kind—the night that gives rest and content to tired eyes.

"There is something troubling you, Miss Percivale," he blurted out at last, "something fresh. I know I have no right to question you, but—but I can't bear to see you looking so sad."

"How can I help it?" she said. "Mr. Clithero, I miss her more and more every day."

Robin regarded her, reading, as he had the power to do, into the depths of her soul. "I know how you sorrow for your loss," he said. "I know what Mrs.

Alderson was to you, and you to her. But it was not of her that you were thinking just now, Miss Percivale."

"Why do you say that?" She looked up with faint astonishment. She had never considered Robin Clithero in any other light than the friend of Owen —an excellent fellow, kind-hearted and loyal. "How do you know?" she added, with a faint blush that clearly indicated his surmise correct.

"Because"—he paused and hesitated—"because your eyes betray you, Miss Percivale." He would have liked to tell her how he had studied those eyes of hers, that he knew every shade of feeling they could express, but he dared not speak so freely. What right had he to do so?

"You were thinking of Owen," he said simply.

"Yes." Here resistance broke down. "Oh! Mr. Clithero, you know him so well—you are a friend of his—perhaps you can tell me—explain to me." She clasped her hands together. "Owen hasn't been the same to me ever since dear mother died—I'm not sure that it wasn't earlier—ever since we went to Chamney. I don't know what it is, for he is always very gentle, very kind—but I feel it here." She pressed her hands to her bosom. "I can't help thinking that there is something on his mind—that he doesn't"—she hesitated, and then brought the words out with a rush —"that he doesn't love me!"

"Oh! but, Miss Percivale!" began Robin protestingly.

"I mean utterly, and without reservation," the girl interrupted. "I don't think he loves me as I love him. I've always had that fear. Once, before we were actually engaged, he looked at me pitifully, and said under his breath, 'You poor little girl!' I never

knew why he said that. I told mother, and she thought it was because he was sorry for the—for my family troubles. But I don't know—I don't know." The girl shook her head ominously.

"I'm sure he loves you," declared Robin stoutly. "He couldn't help himself." Yet Robin spoke with greater assurance than he felt. He, too, had noticed the change in Owen's manner, and ascribed it to its true cause. He cursed his friend under his breath. What was he about, to bring tears to such eyes as those of Lavender? That vampire, that snake-woman, Zélie—it was she who was to blame.

"If he loves me," said Lavender slowly, "why does he want to leave me—at such a time—when I need him most?"

"To leave?" faltered Robin. He thought he had not heard aright.

"Yes—to leave me," repeated Lavender. "He has just told me that he must go to London, and he will not say for how long. He was so strange in his manner, too—I'm sure he was keeping something from me. Oh! Mr. Clithero! you don't think he is ill, and doesn't like to let me know?"

"I'll go and see Owen—have a talk with him," said Robin, frowning, and altogether ignoring the last question. "I'll go at once."

He paused only to arrange the cushions behind Lavender's head. She was seated in a low chair under a great cedar tree, and had a book by her side.

"You can go on reading," he commanded, "and don't fret."

She pretended to do as he bade her as long as he was in sight, but as soon as he had disappeared the book fell to the ground again, and Lavender sat gazing into a mist of sad memories and future fears.

Robin did not find Owen all at once. He searched the house before he thought of looking in Owen's bedroom, and it was there he found him, surrounded by his portmanteaux and other luggage, which he was feverishly engaged in packing.

Rarely had Robin felt so angry with his friend. He could not keep his annoyance from his voice, and spoke abruptly and with a sternness quite unusual to him.

"Owen, what does this mean?"

Owen appeared absorbed in his task. At last, when Robin repeated his question, he glanced up.

"Oh! it's you, is it? What do you want?"

"I want to know what you are doing."

"Owen resumed his work. "You can see for yourself—packing."

"You are going away?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-day—this evening—the sooner the better."

"Owen, you are mad!" Robin advanced into the room. For the moment he almost believed that what he said was true, so wild a light shone in his friend's eyes. "Surely you must know that your duty is here?" he added sharply.

"Duty!" The other rose to his feet. He had been bending over a half-packed portmanteau. "You are always prating of duty, damn you! I'm sick to death of it. Can't you leave me to manage my own affairs?"

"No!" replied Robin, with heat. "Not when I see that you're making someone miserable—someone whom you have sworn to love and cherish." With some difficulty he modulated his voice. "Good Heavens, man! what do you want to go away for—just now, when Lavender is sad, and wants the comfort of your

presence? I found her—not half an hour ago—in tears!"

"I can't help it." Owen kicked the hasp of a dressing-case savagely. "Lavender has got to cry. The sooner she gets the tears over, the better. You'd better stay and dry her eyes."

"What do you mean?" Suddenly Robin's voice had become steady and even. His calm was ominous.

"I mean just this." Owen brushed back a lock of his dark hair that was hanging over his brow. He was in a reckless, desperate mood, and did not care what he said. "Things have gone wrong. It's no use my staying here. I can't keep up the farce any longer. My nerves are all on edge."

"Since you met—Zélie?"

Owen nodded. "Yes—since I met Zélie. You'd better know the truth. I'm going to London to find Zélie."

"You propose to abandon Lavender—to whom you have pledged your word—for that hell-cat? You will throw over an assured future—wealth and position? There's no doubt of it—you are mad!"

Owen broke into a fierce laugh. At that moment it was as if the devil himself had taken possession of him. He wanted to hurt others as he himself was hurt. Let the worst be known.

"Is a man mad because he wants to claim his wife?"

"His wife!" Robin staggered as if he had been struck. He lifted his hand to his brow. "His wife!" he repeated vaguely.

"That's what I said. Zélie is my wife. I married her in Paris, soon after we first met. You can verify the fact for yourself."

"My God!—then Lavender?"

"I have cheated Lavender—cheated you—cheated

everyone. I wanted my aunt's fortune, and played for it. You know the plot. I've lost the game because she died before a new will was made. Lavender has it all, and I can't marry Lavender because I have a wife—Zélie. Besides, I wouldn't if I could, for there's no other woman in the world for me but the one who is mine by every right."

"You blackguard! You vile, cruel devil! But it isn't true! It can't be true!" Robin was trembling in every limb.

"It's true—I swear it!" Owen laughed again, laughed provokingly. He felt as if hot irons were searing his heart, and he could find no other relief for his pain but in a laugh.

Robin lost all control of himself. He saw in confused vision the sweet, pathetic face of Lavender—her humid eyes, her lips that trembled as they made their plaintive appeal. How she would suffer! It was as if a dagger had actually been thrust into her bosom. And the murderer stood there—and laughed as he confessed his crime!

He must silence that laugh, choke it to extinction with his strong fingers. At that moment it was Owen's laugh that dominated everything. With a hoarse cry of rage Robin sprang over the portmanteau that intervened between Owen and himself, and before Owen realised his danger he was seized by the throat, shaken, and at last, as his cheeks assumed the hue of suffocation, thrown violently to the ground.

He lay there, panting and gasping. Robin stood over him, his long arms outstretched, his breast heaving. He was only just beginning to realise what he had done.

Presently he fell on his knees beside the prostrate

man. "My God, Owen!" he cried. "I might have killed you!"

"I wish you had," said Owen feebly. "It would have been the best thing—for me. The end of it all —the end." He dragged himself up to a sitting position by the aid of the leather side of the portmanteau, against which he had fallen.

"And you saved my life once!" groaned Robin, "and I've looked up to you, admired you, set you on a pedestal! And now—Heaven preserve us!—why did you do this thing?"

"It's as well you should know me in my true colours," said Owen, fingering his throat. "I don't bear you any grudge for knocking me about, Rob. I deserve it. If you'd killed me it would have been what I merit. I am a blackguard. But that admission doesn't help things. You see I've got to go. I can't atone to Lavender, but the sooner she forgets me the better. I'll write from London and break my engagement. It's all I can do. I'm going away a penniless man—that is some punishment upon me; and I despise myself—which is a greater penalty still."

"And I—what shall I do?" Robin spread out his hands helplessly.

"You?" Owen scrambled to his feet. "Stay here and comfort Lavender. She will need you. You love her—I'm quite aware of that fact." The eyes of the two men met. "Perhaps some day she will forget me and turn to you. Anyway, I wish it may be so. For myself, I am going out of her life. I am returning to my destiny—to Zélie—if she will have me."

He muttered the last words to himself.

CHAPTER XXXII

It was the month of July, and the London season was on the wane—a particularly brilliant season, altogether unmarred by the threatening aspect of the political horizon. It was a long while since there had been such a succession of brilliant entertainments, parties and balls, such an array of handsome *débutantes,* so lavish a display of social extravagance.

And, of course, the inevitable touch of the *bizarre,* the unorthodox, had not been wanting. On this occasion it was supplied by Zélie, Queen of the Apaches, the dancing girl of Montmartre, who had appeared in London like a meteor and had straightway become a centre of attraction to all classes alike. She made her first formal bow to the British public from the vast stage of the Star Theatre, soon after the tragedy at Chamney Castle, with which her name had indirectly been associated, owing to her admitted connection with the man who was charged with the murder, and never before in the history of the stage had so enthusiastic and remarkable a reception been recorded.

For it was as if Zélie had the power of hypnotising her audiences by some remarkable force inherent to her personality. Calm judgment was suspended when she danced; criticism went by the wind. Press and public declared that she was wonderful, that her performance was a triumph of art, and there were few who ventured to hint at a contrary opinion. This, though Zélie herself, with typical frankness, made

mock of her admirers, and habitually addressed them with her tongue in her cheek. A great measure of her success was due to this attitude—a fact which Zélie was quick enough to recognise and to make the most of.

Her photographs filled the shop windows, she was interviewed and bepuffed, the illustrated papers indulged in supposed biographies of her life, biographies which made Zélie hold her sides with laughter when she had them translated to her. There was one that even went so far as to find her a pedigree, and to talk about the quiet home of her childhood with deeply devoted parents, in some Paris suburb.

She became the "rage." Her dancing was described as "a fine moral lesson." There were clerical dignitaries who preached sermons to this effect. Some few took the opposite side, and discussion arose—heated argument—all wholly beneficial to the notoriety of the dancer and to the exchequer of the Star Theatre.

And this was just what Lord Martyn had anticipated, prophesied, played for. It was precisely in this way that he had designed to mock the world. He had called the tune of malice aforethought, knowing that the foolish rabble would rush and jostle to play the part which he had assigned to it. He had done this because he despised mankind, because he had a grudge against his fellow creatures, because he wanted to laugh at them in his heart, to bring them to scorn and derision. It was a rare joke that he had promised himself, a joke at the world's expense.

And here was the irony of it, for his joke had been turned against himself. All had happened as he had foreseen, but he could derive no mirth from the success of his scheming. Like Frankenstein, he had created his monster, and his strength was not equal to

its suppression. For his own amusement he had given Zélie to the world, promising himself a fine feast of ridicule, and now—the jest had lost its savour. He could find no food for laughter.

He had foreseen the danger when it was too late. The allegory of the panther, freed from its cage, by which he had represented his action to himself, had proved itself all too quickly no vain imagining. One of his dearest friends had already succumbed to the claws of the beast, and—there were worse things in store. It was of these that Lord Martyn was thinking that July afternoon as he restlessly paraded the floor of his study, pausing occasionally to gaze, without seeing, from his window upon the dusty trees and parched grass of a London square—for he had been residing in town ever since the tragedy at Chamney.

He did not blame Zélie; he had no reason to suspect that she was in any way at fault for what had happened that fatal night. It was not even her fascination which had been the cause of Stephen Aldis's death—or so Martyn believed—though the opinion generally held in London was that the fatal blow had been struck for reasons of jealousy—this in spite of the evidence at the police-court proceedings, which made the incriminating letters, the attempted blackmail, responsible for everything. London had taken far more interest in Zélie because of her supposed connection with a "crime of passion." It was a repetition, on a more exalted scale, of what had happened in Paris when a music-hall engagement had followed that drama of the gutter when some half-dozen rough fellows had fought and bled for her—the Queen of the Apaches.

But while not blaming, Lord Martyn would willingly

have undone what he had done. Zélie was a danger, whatever her actual intentions might be. Could not the panther be lured back into its cage—or, at any rate, be removed from a spot where its presence was to be feared? Even in those days, now the best part of three months ago, Martyn vaguely foresaw where the next blow would fall, and he was ready to pay any sum, to run any personal risk, to avert so ghastly a happening.

And so, a day or two after the funeral of Stephen Aldis, he approached Zélie, who was then staying with Mme. de Freyne, pending the completion of other arrangements, and suggested that a return to her native land might be desirable, considering the scandal that would be stirred up at the forthcoming trial of Bibi Coupe-vide. He knew all the time that his arguments were not likely to have weight.

"You see, your name can't be kept out of it, Zélie," he said, "because it was at your invitation the fellow stayed at the castle that night. It will do you no good to be connected in the public mind with such a cut-throat scoundrel."

Zélie lifted her long, velvety lashes and regarded him lazily. "Do you mean that, *mon ami?*"

"I do," he lied, for his argument was contrary to all his theories.

"Ah! but I think you are wrong. The good public is curious. There has been much written about me in your newspapers already. I have been given most excellent advertisement." She nodded her small head sapiently. "They will want to see Zélie of Montmartre with their own eyes. Wait but a little, Milor Harry. It will all fall out as you have said. I shall have *un succès fou,*—a wild success—do not fear for that."

It transpired after this that all Zélie's arrangements

for appearing at the Star Theatre had practically been made. Mr. Radcliffe, the manager, was not the man to allow the grass to grow under his feet, and he had recognised that the dancer had already gained a certain notoriety. Much had been said and written about the remarkable entertainment at Chamney Castle, and the part which Zélie had played in it. Her skill at her particular art—the word was already freely used—had been commented upon. She was a novelty for the theatre by no means to be lost sight of.

Lord Martyn attempted other arguments, including a liberal offer of money, but they all proved equally inefficacious. Zélie's mind was made up. She meant to pursue her stage career and to fulfil the predictions of her success. Martyn was silenced—there was nothing more to be said. The stone that he had set rolling could not be stayed, even though an avalanche should follow in its track.

He had a faint hope that society might not take up the dancer, after all, in spite of the plans he had made to facilitate such a result. But here, again, he had laid his ground too carefully; every seed that he had planted came to fruition. The Duchess of Shiplake, for instance, regarded him with eyes of astonishment when he ventured to suggest that Zélie was better suited for the music-hall stage than for a society leader's drawing-room.

So Zélie danced at the Duchess of Shiplake's "At Home," and after that she practically went everywhere. Even royalty smiled upon her graciously.

She accommodated herself marvellously to this new and difficult environment. She was never awkward or self-conscious. She had natural grace of bearing, and she quickly learned to avoid anything in speech or gesture that might offend. She learnt a little Eng-

lish, which she would talk with a delightful lisp. She knew exactly how to dress to the best advantage, and the fashion which she set in this regard—a gown which, however rich it might be, still gave some subtle suggestion of Montmartre—was freely copied by those who fancied that their figures permitted it—to say nothing of those who, without figures to boast of, slavishly imitated what they believed to be "the thing." Had Lord Martyn been in the mood to appreciate it, he would have recognised in this a laughable phase of his practical joke upon society.

Eve de Freyne had proved an excellent mistress. Zélie owed much of her success to the journalist. They continued to live together, this partly because Eva had, like so many others of both sexes, yielded to the strange fascination of the dancer, and partly because Lord Martyn had requested that it might be so. He imagined that the older woman would have a restraining and beneficial influence, and in a measure this was the case, but, unfortunately, her profession often called Mme. Eve away from home.

Besides, Zélie was the very last person upon earth to be restrained by anyone. She went her own way, and this was a way that was solely of self-interest. She had no love, no emotions, no feelings, save for herself and her own advancement. Mme. Eve often wondered at the cold, calculating cruelty of her ideas, but knew human nature well enough to understand that these were merely primitive instincts, and that, however thickly the veneer might be painted on, beneath it all Zélie remained the savage that she was born—naked and unashamed—soulless.

Of course, admirers swarmed to do her homage. She smiled on all in general. She took all she could get from them, and—gave nothing in return. In

that respect no stone could be cast at her. She was like a siren who draws men to her snare, and then, before their arms can enfold her, allows them to be swallowed up in the morass over which she has hovered. Zélie had learnt the lesson of Owen Mayne's picture, "The Chamois Hunter," learnt it thoroughly and well.

She had not been before the public six weeks before the panther claimed its second victim. Young Lord Nettleton shot himself, leaving a note in which he declared that he had committed the mad act for love of Zélie—that he had been ready to marry her, if that was the only way by which he could win her—but she had steadily refused to grant him any favour whatever. He could not live without her, and so—the end.

Of course, he had been drinking hard, and going the pace absurdly—a young fool. Zélie was not to blame, so everyone agreed. On the contrary, it was admitted that by refusing to marry the heir to an old title she had acted well and honourably, and was worthy of praise. The poor boy's suicide had no effect but to add to her reputation and popularity.

And latterly, as Lord Martyn knew well, there had been a constant visitor at the house in Knightsbridge whose attentions should have been bestowed elsewhere. What had Sir Donald Ransom to do with Zélie of Montmartre? Sir Donald, whose engagement to Lady Beatrice had long ago been announced, and who would have been married to her by now had it not been for an unfortunate family bereavement. The wedding, in consequence, had been postponed till the autumn.

It was this—the intimacy which had sprung up between Sir Donald and Zélie—which was troubling Lord Martyn so much that afternoon. Also, the trial

of Bibi Coupe-vide was in progress—he had been committed from the police court upon the capital charge —and there was always the fear that the name of the writer of the letters, which Bibi was proved to have used for blackmailing purposes, might be revealed. Lord Martyn had moved heaven and earth to prevent this, and, so far, with success. But one could never say what might not be brought out under cross-examination. And there remained two letters still unaccounted for—those the absence of which had thrown Aldis into such a passion that he had paved the way for his tragic death.

The whole situation was destructive to peace of mind, and it was not to be wondered at that Lord Martyn should pace up and down the room restlessly, inwardly cursing his own impotence; he who had always considered himself a strong man, careless of the world, regarding it much as a theatre with puppets that he could force to move for his edification and amusement, now found himself caught in the toils, himself a puppet, dangled at the end of the string of destiny.

"That she should be threatened—she!" he muttered over and over again. "And it has all been my own doing. I have cut a stick for my own back, indeed, sharpened the knife that will shed my heart's blood. And it is through others that the blow will be struck —that is the horror of it—they must suffer—she must suffer—because I imagined that I could play with the lives of men."

He clenched his fists, and threw himself down into an easy chair, then he picked up a paper that lay beside it, and read over again the account of that morning's proceedings in court. He had given his evidence the day before, and his presence was no

longer necessary. It was a Friday, and the trial would certainly be adjourned till the following week. Bibi still strongly maintained his innocence, but no one doubted what the result of the case would be.

Lord Martyn was deep in his paper when the door of the study was pushed open and his name was gently called from the threshold. He looked up sharply, then he sprang to his feet with an exclamation of surprise.

"Beatrice!"

It was Lady Beatrice Clewer who stood there. She wore a smart afternoon frock, a tightly fitting gown that seemed to be moulded to her exquisite figure, and her large hat, with its overhanging brim, threw her face into shadow. But Martyn could see at once how pale she was, how troubled. There were little lines about her lips, and her lashes drooped over the eyes that were usually so clear and frank and blue.

"Beatrice, what is the matter?" He took her hands in his, felt that they were cold despite the heat of the July day. Then he led her into the room, first closing the door, and made her sit down in the chair which he had just vacated.

"I had to come to you, Uncle Harry," she murmured. She was sitting erect, and dragging nervously at her left-hand glove. "They told me you were in the study, and I wouldn't let them announce me. I came straight up."

"Yes?" he questioned. "Is anything wrong, Beatrice? But I can see there is. Oh, you poor white child!" There was infinite tenderness in his voice.

She had drawn off her glove by now, and she held out her slim hand straight before her. The gesture was pathetic, and Lord Martyn realised at once its significance, for Lady Beatrice's engagement ring, the

hoop of brilliants that Sir Donald had presented to her, no longer had place upon her finger.

"I have taken it off," she sighed. "He wouldn't have it back—but I've taken it off." Her fingers drooped. "Even they look wretched, don't they?" she said, with a queer little laugh. "Thin and hungry and sad, as if they felt that there was something missing."

"Tell me why, Beatrice." Lord Martyn drew up a high-backed chair and seated himself heavily. He seemed to have aged all of a sudden. Looking at him now, Beatrice wondered, despite her grief for herself, that she had never before noticed the wrinkles that criss-crossed on his brow.

She was very fond of Uncle Harry, as she always called him. He had been good to her ever since she was a mite of a child—he had spoilt her almost by the number of presents he showered upon her in those days. And later, when she was a little bigger, he had always been ready to devote his time to her, unless he happened to be far away at the other end of the world on one of his wandering expeditions; and, if he were, she was quite sure that he would come back if she should summon him.

There was little sympathy between her stepmother and herself. They had no interests in common. Besides, the Countess of Albyn was of too frivolous a disposition to like the *rôle* of chaperon; she had been only too glad to welcome Sir Donald as a deliverer from an irksome charge. It was not to her stepmother that Beatrice hurried for comfort—it was to her "Uncle" Harry.

"Tell me, dear," he said gently, taking her cold hand in his, "is it—what we feared?"

It had been impossible to keep her in ignorance of the misuse of her letters to Stephen Aldis. The revela-

tion might have been made in court, and she had to be prepared. The poor girl trembled under the blow, for she had imagined the whole silly business long ago dead and forgotten. The letters had been written when she was little more than a child—almost as a joke—she and a school friend had plotted it together.

She would have made full confession to her *fiancé,* but Lady Albyn begged her not to. "There's every chance that your name is never mentioned," her ladyship urged, "so why give yourself away? Do you want to appear a silly little goose in Donald's eyes? Besides, there's no knowing—he might take it badly."

So Beatrice had been silent, and now she regretted her silence.

"Yes," she answered, with a weary little nod of her head, "it's that—mainly. Oh! it's not been mentioned in court, and Sir Laurence says it won't be. But the two other letters, Uncle Harry—the missing ones, you know—they were brought to Donald. He had to buy them, or else—or else——"

She broke off with a sob, and hid her head against the man's shoulder. She could not see how his face was working, how deeply moved he was.

"Or else they would have been published," she faltered. "That was the threat. I believe Donald paid the man what he asked, and then thrashed him well." There was a touch of pride in her tone. "He was angry—oh! very, very angry—this happened last night—it wasn't so much because I had written the letters, but because I had never told him about it. And then I got angry, too, Uncle Harry—I—I've got reason to—and I said foolish things—you know about whom. He went very white, and asked if I didn't trust him. I don't know how I answered, but—but it appears that he didn't mean to come and stay with us at Henley—

as he had arranged, you know—he has decided to go to America after the Cowes week—she is going to America, so that's why. I begged him not to go—if he loved me, but he would not give way—you see he was angry, so I took off my ring and asked him to take it back. He took it, Uncle Harry, and flung out of the house, but to-day he came back and wanted to put it on my finger again." She paused and made little dabs at her eyes with a tiny lace pocket handkerchief rolled up into a ball.

"And you did not allow him to? Why, Beatrice?"

"Because he would not give up going to America," she answered, with some defiance. "Oh! I know—I know—how he has been running after that creature—that Zélie—who is more like a venomous snake than a woman. He makes a pretence of business, but it is only to follow her. She has caught him in her snare, just as she caught that poor, unhappy Nettleton boy. And she will only throw him over when she has broken him. She is a worker of evil. She has no soul!"

"That is true, and perhaps it is Donald's safeguard," replied Lord Martyn, tugging at his beard with his disengaged hand. "She has no love to bestow upon any but herself. He is a strong man, and he will wrestle with her—if it is true that she has really attracted him from you. But I tell you, Beatrice, child, that Zélie, in her way, is stronger than he, and he will not get the better of her. Then he will tire. He will recognise his folly. He loves you really. I'd take my oath to that—and this affair with Zélie is only a mad infatuation. She is a witch, and seems to mesmerise men—they are not exactly responsible. That's how it is with Donald."

"What would you have me do, uncle?" Beatrice asked, lifting a plaintive face.

"Be patient," he replied. "Don't be too hard upon him. He will come back to you. There is only one fear, and that"—he waved his large, strong hand, as if to brush the thought away—"that is no more than a shadow."

"What is it?" asked Beatrice anxiously.

"You said just now that Zélie has no soul," he said slowly. "It is true. But woebetide the man—Donald, or another—who should wake the soul within her. And woebetide Zélie herself—for there is no room in her breast for a new-born soul!"

A silence fell. Lady Beatrice was twisting one of the buttons of her chair round and round, unconsciously loosening it. Suddenly it broke off with a snap.

"He wasn't really so very angry with me—about the letters," she confessed. "I think—I'm sure—he understood. It was I who was jealous. I who made the scene. But I love him so—I love him so—and I can't share his love with another! Oh! if he would only not go to America—if he were freed from this horrible infatuation! For if he didn't see her so often he would forget; he would understand that a pure love is the best. I should soon win him back if I had him all to myself."

She was rocking herself to and fro, her hands clasped about her knees. "Uncle Harry," she murmured, "if I lose Donald, lose him really, I shan't want to live any more! It would kill me!"

She spoke with a strange intensity. She was holding herself rigidly, but after a moment her muscles seemed to relax, and she fell back upon the arm which he had stretched out to support her, like a frail blossom chilled by an untimely frost.

"It would kill me!" she repeated.

"Donald shall come back to you," Lord Martyn asserted boldly. "Be of good cheer, Beattie, child. He loves you with all that is good in him—and there is far more good in him than bad. Yes, I'll answer for it. He shall be at your knees, asking forgiveness, before the month is out."

He stood up, and lifted his clenched fists high above his head. It was as though he were taking an oath.

"As there is a God in Heaven," he exclaimed passionately, "Zélie shall not stand between you and the man you love! I will sweep her from your path—yes—I—I! For I know what I have to do, and it is not yet too late!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

Eve de Freyne was absent from London on the business of the paper for which she worked, and for the last week Zélie had had the little house in Knightsbridge to herself. On the whole, she rather preferred this, though the presence of her friend did not in the smallest degree interfere with her independence.

She had been summoned as a witness at the trial of Bibi Coupe-vide, and her appearance in the box had caused all the sensation she could have wished. The court, of course, was crowded, and she had skilfully played to the gallery on her own behalf. She understood that all the sordid details that might be dragged into the light of day—her relations with Bibi, for instance—must either damage her materially or add to the notoriety which she had already gained—a great deal depended upon her own behaviour. She passed triumphantly through the ordeal.

Bibi had not given her away. He had revealed no word of the plot against Owen Mayne into which she had dragged him. Probably he realised that even should this be proved it would not help him at all, he who had apparently been caught red-handed. On the contrary, it might have told against him, as proof of the lightness in which he held human life. For Zélie knew the character of the man well enough to be quite sure that he would not hesitate to betray her if thereby he should be the gainer.

There was another reason, too, why he held his

tongue. Zélie had once contrived to see him while in prison, and had exercised her blandishments over him to her own advantage. He was always her *Bibi adoré,* and she was working to make money for his sake, and one day—when he was free once more—they would return to Paris, and the good time would begin for them both.

Bibi protested his innocence of the crime—even to her. She professed to believe him, though she had no doubt whatever that it was he who had struck the blow—by mistake. But since he was innocent he would be acquitted, she maintained, and then all would be well. So she left Bibi buoyed up with hope, and in blissful ignorance of the desperation of his plight.

For herself, she did not care one way or the other whether he was acquitted or condemned, so long as he did not compromise her. Perhaps of the two she would have preferred him hanged—it would save her trouble in future.

The defence sought to disprove that there had been any quarrel between the two men with regard to the incriminating letters, also that Bibi had manifested any jealousy of Stephen Aldis. It was concerning these matters that Zélie was questioned. Her answers were non-committal, and of very little service to the prisoner, who sat in the dock, gazing at her with hungry eyes, firmly believing, in his stupidity and ignorance, that when Zélie had spoken there would be an end to the whole matter.

Zélie was as much as home in the witness-box as in the theatre. The court was thronged with fashionably dressed men and women, and she was the centre of attraction. The wretched prisoner was overlooked altogether.

Yes, it was at her invitation that Bibi Coupe-vide

had spent that night at Chamney Castle. She desired his presence in order that her dancing should be the greater success. They had danced together in Paris, and the public had approved. She had no knowledge as to the reason of his appearance at Chamney in the first instance—he had certainly not followed her. She did not even know that he was in England. She spoke of Bibi as if he had never been anything to her but a companion of the footlights—one in whom her only interest was that of a somewhat disdainful compassion. No direct question about her relations with the prisoner was put to her—had it been she would doubtless have lied.

She returned home that afternoon unruffled by her experiences in court, pleased, if anything, by the sensation she had caused, and by the prospect of seeing her portrait in the illustrated papers on the following morning. The servant told her that a gentleman wished to see her, and was waiting in the drawing-room.

"What name did he give?" she asked carelessly. The maid was a new one, and not yet accustomed to her ways. Zélie was not at home to every chance caller.

"He would not give his name," answered the girl. "He said that madam would see him, and that he would wait."

Zélie frowned, and passed on. She would scold the maid another time. Visitors must not be admitted in this haphazard fashion. Doubtless, however, it was a friend who wished to give her a pleasant surprise. She rather expected a call from a certain new admirer with whom she had supped the other night.

She entered the drawing-room, and found herself confronted by Owen Mayne. Immediately she lost her temper.

"You!" she exclaimed angrily, "you! Have I not forbidden you to come to my house? That girl is a fool to have admitted you! I shall send her packing!"

"Zélie!" He stood quite still in the middle of the room. He appeared a broken man. His face was thin and sallow, his eye sunken and hungry. His clothes —well cut, as always—were dusty and uncared for. He had quite lost the smart appearance that had been wont to characterise him. "Zélie—I couldn't keep away. My God! I've tried—since you were so cruel to me that day. I vowed that you were not a woman, but a devil in woman's flesh. But you are my wife, you know—my wife!"

"Cruel to you?" she retorted. "What did you expect? After telling me a host of pretty stories about the fortune that was bound to be yours, you come to me without a penny in your pocket, almost without a coat to your back. Yes, things had gone wrong, you said, and the little plaster saint was going to have every penny of the money, after all. But we could be happy all the same—you and I—because we loved!" Her tone was charged with infinite scorn. "So would I come away with you at once, and we would share a garret somewhere, and you would paint, while I—*mon Dieu!*—I might twiddle my thumbs! For I must leave the stage—that was part of the programme. Monsieur was jealous! Monsieur must have me all to himself in the garret, with nothing a year to live upon!"

She sank into a chair, tapping the floor viciously with the heel of her little boot, and laughing—a laugh that was like the threatening snarl of a wild beast.

The man drew himself up wearily. He had the appearance of one who had suffered much.

"I was a fool," he said in low, intense tones. "I admit it. But—but I thought you cared, Zélie. That was my folly—to think that you had one spark of humanity in you and that it was for me. I loved you because of your very dissimilarity to the rest of the world—because you are like a creature fashioned out of the mists of time—without heart, or warm blood, or soul—a siren, a witch—I loved you for all this, and flattered myself that I, too—with you—could be outside the world. Those weeks I spent at Selwood Manor were a torture to me, and I only lived in the thought that one day you and I would be reunited. I degraded myself—played the blackguard's part—but it was for your sake, so I didn't care. And then, when things went wrong, I could stand it no more. I might have kept up the farce—have found some other way of carrying the cheat to completion—have lowered myself still more. But I couldn't do it. I hungered and thirsted for your kisses. I saw your red, alluring lips by day and night. They called me. I threw up everything and answered the call."

"You'd better have stayed and married your pink and white doll," retorted Zélie, removing one by one the pins from her hat with nonchalant fingers. "I told you I'd never have interfered with you, husband and wife though we may be. I advised you to go back to her. I thought you had. Why didn't you?"

Owen shuddered. "Zélie—I love you! You are mine, before God and the world! As for Lavender Percivale—may her lips never again be defiled by kisses of mine. I left you that day—when I realised that you wanted none of me—in a passion of rage and despair. I tried to forget. I couldn't. I have been trying to forget through all these weeks. I cannot. I have been in hell. I can't tell you how I have lived.

I hardly know myself. I have starved—because I had no appetite for food. I have drunk myself besotted night after night, but it has not brought forgetfulness. I have taken drugs, but my dreams—oh! God! My dreams!"

He shivered, and pressed his elbows against his chest. "Look at me!" he said. "It is to this I have come—because I love you!"

Zélie had taken off her hat by now, and she laid it down on a sofa close beside her. She still held the long, sharp pins in one hand, allowing them to roll to and fro between her palm and her fingers.

She threw a disdainful glance at Owen and shrugged her shoulders. "I cannot help it," she said, "if you are a fool. Either you should have kept your promise to me, and come with money in your pocket, or you should have kept away. For myself, I would sooner the latter. I do not need you."

"But I need you," he interrupted, and there were strange fires that burned in his hollow eyes. "Zélie, that is what I have come to tell you. I cannot live without you. I won't go back to my hell—alone! You are my wife——"

Zélie had sprung to her feet. She was quivering with rage. "You dare to threaten me?" she cried. She pointed imperiously to the door. "Begone!" she commanded. "Out of my sight at once! I hate you—I hate you!"

The pins fell clattering from her hand to the floor, all save one, the longest and sharpest. She threatened him with it.

"Go!" she panted. Then she broke forth into a flood of low Montmartre expletives, words such as had not passed her lips for months. She stood there, a fury,

defiant, uncontrolled. Her breast was heaving, her eyes were like white-hot steel.

"You may kill me, if you like," he said. "I don't mind—if it's at your hand. But I claim you, Zélie. claim you as my wife!"

He opened his arms and advanced upon her.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"I CAN'T live without you, Zélie—I can't!" Owen Mayne advanced blindly, his arms extended. His feet dragged, and he swayed a little from side to side. He had lost all dignity, all strength. He was like a drunken man, without reasoning power, obsessed by one all-absorbing desire.

"And I hate you!" Zélie stood erect, not even deigning to retreat before him. Her bosom was heaving, and her eyes flashed in infinite scorn. And, indeed, the man presented a pitiable spectacle of moral and physical degeneration.

It seemed as if he did not hear her. For the moment all recollection of those weeks of agony, during which with drink and drugs he had been blighting his body and soul, was swept away. He saw only Zélie—Zélie in the flesh, not a shadow, a form without substance, such as his dreams had conjured up.

He had forgotten—utterly forgotten—how he had come to her immediately after his flight from Selwood Manor, believing that she would welcome him with open arms, and how she had discarded him with mocking disdain—he who had sinned for her, degraded himself to the lowest depth of infamy—how she had bidden him return whence he came, as she had no further use for him.

At that a violent rage had surged in his breast, and he had seen Zélie for what she was. He had swung away from the house, her derisive laughter ringing in

his ears, vowing that she had murdered love and crushed the passion that he had borne for her to extinction. Might he never set eyes upon her more! Wife of his though she was, he consigned her body to defilement, her soul to the nethermost hell.

He had made an effort after that to return to the old life. Paris saw him once more—he strove to paint. He succeeded in earning just enough to keep himself alive and to pay for the poison with which, almost at once, he sought to banish memory and to lay the ghosts that haunted him. It was all in vain. The coils of the snake were about his limbs, the claws of the panther rent his breast, the beak of the vulture was in his heart. The siren who was now snake, now panther, now bird of prey, demanded his soul, while the woman who was the earthly representative of that siren mocked and rejected him.

It came to his ears that Robin had arrived in Paris in search of him. Owen sold at ruinous sacrifice the few sketches and pictures that remained to him—he had already disposed of the furniture and effects of his studio and flat—and returned to London, where he lost himself in the vortex. Robin sought him in vain.

His funds, such as they were, were soon exhausted. He tried to paint—if only to earn a pound or two—but found that his hand had lost its cunning. He sank lower and lower. His strength and health gave way. Time after time he set out to find Zélie, but caught sight of himself—a sorry figure—in some mirror behind a shop window, and then slunk back to his miserable apartment. He was ashamed.

But by degrees even shame lost its restraining influence. Nothing remained but a great hunger for the touch of Zélie's hands, a maddening thirst for the

kisses of her lips—those kisses that were his by right. And his drug-begotten dreams came nightly to add to his frenzy. He haunted the stage door of the Star Theatre. Once, in coming out and passing to her brougham, Zélie had actually brushed against him; her cavalier, a tall, soldierly man, had pushed Owen roughly aside. There might have been a scene, but Owen had become suddenly conscious of his own degradation. He slunk away, and as the brougham passed him by broke down and wept weak tears. He knew then that his day was done.

The intensity of his passion drove him at last to Zélie's house. He had deprived himself of his drug the night before—by a superhuman effort—imagining that thereby his head would be clearer. The only result was that he felt miserably weak and ill. Nevertheless, he dressed himself with some care for his appearance, and set out. He had eaten nothing, had no desire for food. On the way he had been compelled to fortify himself with brandy, stopping at a public-house for the purpose. It was in this state that he had been admitted to Zélie's presence.

But all this was forgotten now as he staggered forward, imagining that he was about to take his wife in his arms, to slake his thirst at her lips. His senses reeled, and quite suddenly the recollection of her harsh words forsook his brain. He was deaf to her vituperation, to her declaration of hatred. There was a mist before his eyes, and he could not see the loathing that her face expressed; he was blind to the menace of her uplifted hand—the hand that was armed with the long, sharp pin.

His face was close to hers, she could feel his breath, breath that sickened her with its reek of brandy, upon her cheek. Zélie uttered a scream, not of fear, but of

hatred and disgust, and then she struck at that face, shortening the weapon in her hand, stabbing with it, viciously, cruelly, careless of consequences, only—in her rage—eager to see the red blood flow.

It was her very fury that saved Owen from serious harm. Had she been less frenzied with passion she might have aimed deliberately at one of his eyes. As it was, the hatpin wounded his cheek, his lip, his forehead—and then broke.

"There—there—there!" Zélie screeched out the word each time she struck. The foulest insults fell from her tongue. Her face was contorted with rage—hideous—for the moment every trace of her weird charm had deserted her.

Owen fell back—dazed—foolishly astounded—conscious of sharp pain. Blood was trickling from his forehead into one of his eyes, blinding it. He lifted his hands to his face, and then gazed at them vacantly, blinking, wondering why they were smeared with red.

"Zélie," he muttered, "what is it? What have you done to me?"

"I wish I'd killed you," she panted. She was still holding the head of the broken hatpin, and now she threw it away with an impatient jerk.

And then—quite suddenly—it all came back to him, the sin that he had sinned for this woman's sake, the trouble that he had wrought—the ignominy and shame—what he had been, and what he was.

But the manhood had gone out of him, the strength of will, the power to mock at himself and at the world. The vampire of his passion had sucked his very life-blood; he had offered up his vitality as a sacrifice upon the altar of the siren. Owen Mayne stood face to face with the tragedy of his own existence.

He had poisoned himself with deadly drugs; he had

neglected to nourish his body; he had scorched and burnt his brain till it was no better than white ash; he had trampled pride under his feet; he was mean, despicable, unspeakably vile.

So he saw himself at that moment. There was a mirror upon the wall in front of him, a mirror in a quaint and ornate frame of ebony—one of Eve de Freyne's curiosities. Fantastic faces, grotesques, were carved on either side, and at the top and bottom, but none of them could equal in repulsive ugliness the face, blood-stained, contorted, hideous, that Owen saw reflected in the mirror itself. Could it, indeed, be his own? Why, it might have depicted all the sin of all the world. It was scarcely human. Yet he had been a man—once.

He sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. Great tears, that were reddened with his blood, welled between his fingers. His whole body shook and quivered. Choking sobs broke in his throat. He wept for the loss of all that had enabled him to hold up his head among his fellows—his pride, his self-respect, his manhood. And all the while the name of his destroyer, she for whom he had sacrificed these things, was on his lips.

"Zélie! Zélie!" He rocked himself to and fro, repeating the word in a monotonous wail.

Zélie regarded him from under her curling lashes, and she moistened her dry lips with her tongue; she had the aspect of a beast of prey who has tasted blood and who thirsts for more.

How she loathed the sight of that abject figure, rocking to and fro in its chair! Of all things she detested weakness. She quite forgot that it was in admiration of his strength, his defiance of danger, that she had given herself to Owen Mayne. Even now,

had he thrown himself upon her, crushed her slim body with his powerful hands—or, rather, hands that had been powerful once—had he beaten her, kicked her as she lay at his feet, she would have understood, for the primitive instinct was still strong in her, and to her mind this was the way of a man with the woman he loved. Bibi Coupe-vide would have dealt thus with her—Bibi, who had not a tithe of Owen's physical strength.

"Zélie, I am your husband. I could proclaim it to the world!" His hands had fallen to his sides, and he was staring up at her with his bloodshot eyes. Then he muttered, half to himself: "Why not—why not?"

This was the danger, and Zélie realised it. That accursed marriage! How often she had laughed to think that she had desired the death of her husband—plotted for it—not because he was her husband, but because she imagined that he had deceived her, because her fierce jealousy had been aroused. It was another feeling that animated her now. This wreck of humanity—this pauper—could go forth and proclaim that he had a right over her—that she was his wife!

How could she sweep him from her path? She ground her little, sharp teeth together and clenched her fists. Then she told herself that she would find a way if only he could be silenced for the time being. That was the essential point.

Then she remembered how she had dealt with Bibi. Promises are easy to speak, and men are fools where women are concerned. Owen must be conciliated since he had this weapon in his hand and might use it. It was a pity that she had lost her temper and struck him.

Her task proved easier than she had anticipated, and

it was Owen himself who gave her the opening she desired.

Suddenly he dropped from his chair upon his knees, and trailed across the floor till he reached her side, when he clutched at her skirt, bowing his head almost to the ground, hiding his face in the folds of her dress. He was ashamed of his scars, of his degradation, of his self-abasement, of what he had seen in the mirror.

"Zélie," he moaned, "it isn't true that you hate me—tell me that it isn't true. You were angry, and it is in your nature to be quick-tempered. Why, I remember, even in Paris, months and months ago, when we were happy, you once threatened me with a knife, and you might have used it, too, only I soothed you with a kiss, a fierce kiss that bit the flesh as keenly as any knife. Say that you were angry, Zélie, and that you don't hate me. I'll do anything you like. I'll go away until you call me. I know that I'm a despicable object now—that I've been playing the fool with my life. But it isn't too late, if you'll give me hope. I'll give up the drugs, the drink, everything that has been playing the devil with me. I'll be a man again. I'll work—I will, I swear it! Only say that you want me to, Zélie—that you care!"

She stretched out her hand and touched his head. He had drawn himself up as he poured out his supplication, so that she could easily do so.

"Get up, *mon ami,*" she said, forcing herself to speak gently. "It's true, I was angry. I am sorry I struck you. Forgive me."

She allowed him to grasp her hand as he rose to his feet. She knew that it was in her power to dictate any terms she pleased. Soft words—why had she not realised at once how much more potent they may be than blows? The panther had not yet learnt to sheathe

its claws till the right moment to strike presented itself. Zélie was gaining wisdom, but the primitive instinct was still strong within her.

Owen stood before her with bowed head, but his heart beat wildly within his breast. What did the wounds upon his face matter now? Zélie was his, and he loved her none the less because she had inflicted them. It was this very savagery in her which had charmed him from the first; his brain had created her, and she had sprung to life—vicious, cruel, alluring, the realisation of a fantastic dream.

Zélie dictated her terms. They had as their object the immediate ridding herself of his presence and the assurance that the relationship between Owen and herself should not be revealed. She did not mind how many promises she made for the future—the future would take care of itself. It was more than likely that Owen would drink and drug himself to death.

She must bring her London season to a close—she must pay her promised visit to America—the provinces were clamouring for her. Till the end of the year at least she must have complete independence. Then she would return to Paris, and Owen should join her. She would be tired of fame by that time, and would crave for a return to the old Bohemian life. Together they would begin all over again. It would be delightful. Owen should paint his "Chamois Hunter" picture afresh. It would make him famous, for the world would know that she, Zélie, had been his model.

Just such promises she had made glibly to Bibi Coupe-vide—and with just as much intention of carrying them into effect.

"And in the meanwhile you may see me at the theatre," she said; "not here—and not too often. I've

no wish that anyone should suspect. You must have patience."

He promised that he would. He vowed that he would work, that he would raise himself from the slough into which he had sunk—that he would give up the poison which had brought him so low—anything, if it was to win Zélie in the end.

Zélie shrugged her shoulders. She did not care what he did. She only wanted him to go. There was another visitor who might arrive at any minute —Sir Donald, in point of fact—and how could she receive him without tidying her hair and generally attending to her appearance, ruffled as she was after this troublesome interview with Owen?

And Owen wanted to kiss her—as a ratification of their treaty. She laughed, and pointed satirically to his reflection in the mirror. "Would you have me kiss you now?" she asked.

This recalled him to his senses, arousing him once more to a knowledge of his shame. The scratches upon his face had ceased to bleed. He crossed to the mirror and rubbed the stains away as best he could with his handkerchief.

Then he came back and took Zélie's hand and lifted it to his lips. "Good-bye," he faltered. "I'll go now. I know that I'm a poor, mean creature—a despicable hound—but you can do what you will with me, Zélie. You have only to threaten not to see me again and I cringe to you. God—but it's not so long ago since I was a man!"

And so he left her. He had but a few shillings in his pocket, and did not know where he was to obtain more. Yet he had promised to work, to reform!

He walked slowly, dragging his feet. A sense of definite lassitude came upon him. Near the door of

the house he had met Sir Donald Ransom, looking spruce, pleased with himself, expectant. Sir Donald had glanced at him without recognition. How low he must have fallen!

Sir Donald was going to see Zélie. Owen stood at the corner of the street until the young man had knocked at the door and been admitted. A welcome guest, no doubt—while he, Owen, Zélie's husband, who had every right to go there, was refused the house! And he had submitted without a murmur! He despised himself, loathed himself—but in a half-hearted, spiritless fashion.

The craving for drink seized upon him. Of course, it was that which had made such a coward of him. He had taken no stimulant for nearly twenty-four hours; no food, either. He must have a little brandy, and then, perhaps, he would see his way clearer—just a little, to put life into his sluggish veins.

He turned into a public-house. Zélie, who desired nothing better than that he should drink himself to death, would have laughed could she have seen him then.

And she would have rejoiced still more had she seen him later on, a pitiable object, tossing on his bed in the delirium of a drug-begotten sleep. For she would have recognised the futility of taking any steps to rid herself of a man who was bent upon his own destruction.

CHAPTER XXXV

ZÉLIE leant back upon her sofa and laughed noisily. She was in her dressing-room at the theatre, and it was little more than a quarter of an hour since the whole vast house had resounded with the applause which her dancing always called forth. She was quite accustomed to it now, and accepted it as merely her due.

Her performance was very similar to that which she had given at Chamney Castle, save that in the *Danse du Néant* the presence of a masculine companion was only implied, just as in her other dances the audience were always able to people the stage with characters which did not exist in actual fact. It had been deemed most effective that Zélie's remarkable personality should not be interfered with by the introduction of another performer.

It had not taken her long to recover from the effects of her interview with Owen. As soon as the drawing-room door closed behind him she had thrust out her tongue derisively, danced a few steps of a wild can-can, abused him in her coarsest Montmartre slang, and then, finding herself before the mirror, commenced to smooth down her hair, congratulating herself all the time upon her astuteness in having got rid of an incubus.

"Claim me as his wife—he! Oh! *mon Dieu!* but it would have been awkward if he had. I did well to temporise. For this Owen—this husband of mine,

whom I hate—he shall not stand in my way"—she clenched her fists—"I say he shall not! I will rid myself of him—we shall see—we shall see!"

Her features softened curiously. "For what would Donald say if he knew that I was not free? He has queer ideas, this good Donald of mine, and he would not take a woman who belonged to another man, though he does not hesitate to break his vows to the girl who was to have been his wife. Ah! they are funny, these men, and we can twist them round our fingers, we who are clever." She lifted her fingers to her lips and kissed them lightly. "For, see this. They tell me that Donald is in love with an English miss—oh! but very much in love—that he will marry her, and they will be happy ever after—but I say, 'No! I like your Donald. He is handsome—he pleases me.' And so I smile upon him—and it is enough. *Voilà!*—he is at my feet. Why not? There is another who loves him? Bah! I mock myself of women—I mock myself of the world!"

A drop or two of blood which had fallen from Owen's wounded face, and stained the carpet, caught her eyes at that moment; she ground her heel over the spot, muttering another curse upon her husband, then she hurried off to her bedroom to continue there the adjustment of her toilette. She was not content till she had changed her afternoon gown for a becoming *negligée,* and by the time she had done this her equanimity was quite restored.

Of course, she had kept Sir Donald waiting, but she looked so extraordinarily fascinating when at last she reappeared in the drawing-room that he could find nothing to say but just, "Zélie! Zélie! How wonderful you are! How can any man resist you?"

She smiled upon him in answer, and, indeed, a curi-

ous change had come over her face. Its lines were less hard, the humanity of it more marked. Had Lord Martyn seen her at that moment he would have feared for her. Had he not always said that Zélie's day would be over if ever she became like other women—if ever she should find her soul?

They dined together that evening, Sir Donald and Zélie. The name of Lady Beatrice was not mentioned between them. After dinner they drove to the theatre in Zélie's brougham.

Just before her turn was signalled the dancer was handed a note. It came from Lord Martyn, and it requested a private interview after the performance. Zélie sent a reply inviting him to her dressing-room when she should have left the stage.

She found him there awaiting her. She was flushed, a little out of breath, and her nerves on edge, as they always were after the abandonment of her dancing. She threw herself down upon a sofa, her breast heaving under the thin black corsage which she wore as the Apache in the last item of her performance. The floor was littered with other articles of attire, gauzy fabrics of white and black, all of them in curious contrast to the rich evening gown which had been laid out over a chair, ready to be donned again.

"I always rest for a few minutes after I leave the stage," she explained, "but you know that, Milor Harry. You may talk to me while I lie here."

He drew a chair up to her side and talked. His face was grave, and Zélie thought that he had aged remarkably since she had first met him. He kept pulling at his black beard in a manner that was characteristic of him.

And it was with characteristic promptitude, too, that he came to the point, once the ordinary words

of greeting and compliment were spoken. Lord Martyn was not given to beating about the bush when his mind was made up. And it was quite made up now.

There remained but one way by which the panther might be cajoled back to its cage—the panther that had done so much harm already. It was he himself, Lord Martyn, who had given the beast its freedom, so upon him lay the responsibility of guarding against other victims falling into the clutch of those death-dealing claws. He must atone—by devoting himself.

"Zélie," he said smoothly, "I feel that in a way I'm answerable for you. I'll be quite frank about it. I launched you in London, knowing full well that you would be a danger to society, that your beauty—your astonishing power of attraction, which, whatever it may be due to, is hardly human—would set people by the ears. I had a grudge against society, you see. My experiment has been successful—too successful. I think I underestimated the folly of my kind. Well, my dear, I don't blame you, of course. It's all due to the inscrutable ways of what we are pleased to call Providence. But I fancy it's time to draw in, and with this object in view I'm going to make you an offer."

"An offer?" She folded her bare arms above her head, and the white of them glinted from beneath the meshes of rick black hair which lay upon them like a veil. Her lashes drooped lazily over her eyes. "An offer?" she repeated.

He nodded gravely. "Yes. I think I understand your nature, Zélie, as well, at least, as a man can understand the heart of a woman. You love applause, admiration, position, gold—you love yourself. Beyond these things you are cold. You despise mankind—

yes, men and women alike. It pleases you that men shall pay you court, but you have no love to give in return. You have never loved. You never will."

She lifted her lids and turned her head a little. Her eyes glittered behind their dark circles of paint. "And if this is so," she said, "why do you speak of it? To what are you coming?"

"To this," he responded. "I am ready to give you all that you most desire, Zélie—a high position, a name that is centuries old, a fortune that you may play with as you please. And I do not ask for love in return. There shall be no question of love—as love—between us. I merely want you to be my wife." Even at that moment Martyn could not restrain the vein of satire that was so strong within him.

This was the only way—or so he had decided—by which Sir Donald and Lady Beatrice could be restored to each other's arms. The spell of the siren must be removed. There was real love between the two young people in whose fortunes he was so deeply interested—and Donald was an honourable man, though he had been snared, tempted, and was drifting to dishonour in spite of all that was good in him.

"So you wish to marry me, Milor Harry?" Zélie sat up as she put the question.

"Yes," he replied quietly, "to marry you."

"But you don't"—she hesitated—"love me?"

"No—no more than I expect you to love me, Zélie. Love, in the true sense of the word, died in my breast many years ago. It left me cold." He folded his arms and fixed his eyes upon the girl. For one brief moment, as he spoke of dead love, they had softened—then the light died out of them again.

"And you do not even feel that—that attraction which you say I exert over men—without knowing it?

You have no passion?" She threw out the word boldly, defiantly. There had been times when she wondered why this strong man, who had seemingly taken such interest in her, had never, by word or deed, expressed any warmer feeling.

"No."

It was then that Zélie had thrown herself back upon the sofa and broken out into a harsh laugh. For she guessed the reason of Lord Martyn's proposal.

"Yet you would marry me—why?" The words were broken by her laughter.

He frowned a little—for why should she laugh? "Let us say that it is because I am still ambitious for you," he replied, carefully weighing his speech, "because I want my wife to be a woman who is different to any other woman on the face of the earth. The world regards me as an eccentric man, Zélie; perhaps I wish to crown my eccentricities by this marriage. At any rate, what I propose is all for your benefit; so, since you do not desire love, but only worldly gain—you have told me so many times—why should we trouble about the reason of my proposal? A union between you and me will hurt no one and it may save many."

Zélie stretched out her hand and touched his wrist. "Ah! there we have it, *mon ami!*" she said. "That is the true reason. I am a danger, and you would save someone from me. It is of Sir Donald that you are thinking. Am I not right, *hein?*"

He inclined his head. "You do not love Sir Donald," he replied, "only it pleases you to encourage his infatuation. But I can give you more, far more, than ever Sir Donald could offer. You will not hesitate between us, Zélie?"

Lord Martyn spoke bluntly, for this was his trump

card. He knew that if he was to gain his point it was only the girl's avarice, her self-love, that he could appeal to. She had no finer emotion to play upon. The conviction of this had actuated him throughout. It was merely a compact that he was proposing, a compact in which all the advantage was on one side. He had imagined that Zélie would see it in this light.

But for once he was mistaken—as he was soon to learn. For Zélie laughed again, and her laughter jarred upon his ears. Then she rose from her sofa and crossed to her dressing-table; it was as though she wished to signify that the interview was at an end.

"I am flattered, Milor Harry," she said, "by your proposal." She dropped him a mock curtsy. "But, no—I cannot accept it." She was not going to acknowledge herself a married woman—there was no need for that. "Nor would I if I could—without love," she added.

Martyn could hardly believe that he had heard aright. He had not had the smallest doubt of the success of his manœuvre till Zélie laughed. He rose to his feet and stepped quickly to the girl's side. He towered over her as he stood there, a strong man whose self-confidence had received a sudden check.

"Without love?" he faltered. "Zélie, for Heaven's sake, what do you mean? You do not love anyone? You are not the sort of woman who loves. You can play with men's souls and toss them away—that is why I felt it would cost you nothing to give up those who are hovering round you now—the one especially —and marry me. But love—what have you to do with love?'

"Only this," she replied, and of a sudden her voice had softened, and all its mocking ring had gone from

it—"that he has taught me to love—yes, Donald. For the others, I have cared nothing—no, never, never. No man has ever really stirred my heart. I have never known what love is—till now. I never thought I should. I never wished to. You were right when you said that I wanted nothing but gold—gold and applause—gold and admiration—but always gold first. Had you come to me yesterday, *mon ami,* I might have made you any promise you desire, but you are just a few hours too late." She pressed her hands to her palpitating bosom. "For now there is something born within me—something that has sprung to life within my breast—and it is sweet and fresh and tender, and I feel that I must guard it as a mother guards her young. That is why I was hard just now, why I laughed, for it was as if you were attacking that which I cherish."

Zélie's eyes shone fiercely, and yet Lord Martyn had never before seen so much humanity in her face. He knew that his mission had failed, that it was hopeless, and for a few moments anger mastered him. His heavy hands fell upon the girl's shoulders, and she bent under their weight. He could have killed her with one blow, and yet it was she who had mastered him.

"Woman—witch!" he cried, "thing of evil! have you not a single spark of human feeling in your breast? Hasn't a little charity been born in you at the same time as this love? Don't you know that you are robbing another of all that makes life happy for her? Was it no lesson to you that Cecily Cuthbert should call you murderess? For Donald Ransom does not love you, I say. It is not love that he offers you. You have ensnared him, you vile sorceress of lust and passion! His heart belongs to Lady Beatrice Clewer—

it will never be yours! You cannot inspire love—you!"

"What do I care?" Zélie drew up her lithe body, and met the burning hate of the man's gaze with defiance. "It is I who win. Donald has taught me to love him, and by that love I shall hold him fast. What is Lady Beatrice Clewer to me? What is any man or woman in the whole world to me, except the one being I love? Why, I should not care if the earth were drenched through and through with their tears—aye, or with their blood!"

She spoke with a wild fervour that was not without its finer side. For Zélie was not to be judged by ordinary standards, as none knew better than Lord Martyn himself. Her very cruelty and heartlessness, her utter lack of human sympathy—all these were but as Nature had bestowed them upon the primeval creatures of which Zélie was the prototype. Could she be blamed because she was a living expression of primitive instinct?

"Blame the inherent cruelty of things," Martyn muttered to himself as his hands fell to his sides.

"Ah! Zélie! Zélie!" he added aloud. "It is useless for me to argue with you. You have beaten me, and left me without a weapon—I who could strangle the life out of you with one of my hands!" He addressed her in a tone of intense sadness. "There will be more tears and mourning about your path, Zélie, more pain and bloodshed, and it is I who am to blame, not you yourself, who know no better."

He extended his large hands. "See!" he cried. "They are stained already—and the tears that have fallen upon them—and are to fall—cannot wash away the marks! But listen to me, Zélie, for what I tell you is true, even though I am looking into the future.

Your eyes are dry now, but they will be wet. You say that love is born in your breast, you who have never known love. Do you understand what that means? It means that the soul within you is awakening—that you will be a woman like other women. And the birth pangs will not be easy, Zélie, nor will the soul that is born to you bring anything but sorrow and despair!"

He left her upon that and made his way slowly to the street. As he emerged from the stage door a newsboy thrust a late edition of an evening paper before him.

"Result of the great murder trial! Here you are, guv'nor!" cried the urchin. "Scene in court!" The boy was carrying a bill on which the words appeared in huge letters.

So the end had been reached sooner than Martyn had expected. He purchased a paper, and paused under a street lamp to inspect the stop-press news. He had no doubt in his mind as to the verdict.

But as he read the brief paragraph to its conclusion he started, and his hands trembled so that he could scarcely hold the paper.

A cry escaped his lips. "My God! No! no! It isn't possible! it isn't possible!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

"HAVE met with accident. Come to me.—OWEN."

The telegram had been despatched from a central London hospital. The thin pink paper fluttered from Robin's hand to the floor, and he sat quite still for a minute, staring at the picture upon which he was engaged. It was a landscape, painted in the neighbourhood of Selwood, and he was putting the finishing touches to it in his studio. He had leased a cottage upon the Manor estate, and had resided there ever since Owen's flight—except for the time which he had spent in vain pursuit of his friend.

The picture had been commissioned by Lord Martyn, who had manifested an interest in the young artist, a disposition to lend him a helping hand. He had given Robin certain introductions, of which the latter had made good use, so that future prospects appeared bright, and there was no need for him to bury himself once more in the forest of Fontainebleau. He had, indeed, removed his belongings from his former home and settled definitely in England.

"Poor fellow! poor Owen!" Robin rose, and began rummaging among the papers upon his writing-table for a time-table. "Of course I'll go to him—go by the very next train. God grant it may not be anything really serious."

There was no train to London, however, for another

two hours. Selwood was on a branch line where there was little traffic. Robin decided that he would walk over to the Manor and tell Lavender that he might be absent for a day or two—it was just as well that he had the opportunity. And in the meanwhile he would send a telegram to Owen announcing his approaching arrival.

He would not tell Lavender the true object of his journey. There were reasons why he could not do so. As he plodded along across the fields, taking a short cut to the Manor—a pleasant walk through wood and over meadow—he meditated, with a half-smile, a smile that was tinged with sadness and self-sympathy, upon the curious state of affairs that had come into being since the departure of Owen from Selwood.

It was all due to Robin's kindness of heart and weakness of character. He could not bear to give pain, and he had shrunk from the task of breaking to Lavender the news of her lover's perfidy. She did not know—even to-day—that Owen was already a married man!

It had all come about so naturally, so quietly, and Robin had found himself involved in a maze of subterfuge—a maze from which he could only extricate himself by disavowing all the stories which he had concocted—before he knew what he was about. One excuse had led to another, one small lie had demanded a bigger to back it up, and so it had gone on till the tangle was past remedy.

For Lavender was so terribly distressed that day when Owen had departed for London without a word of explanation, leaving the girl who loved him so devotedly at a time when she needed him most. How could Robin have spoken the truth then? It was beyond his power to do so. She pressed him with

questions. Had he not had a long talk with Owen, been taken into the confidence of the latter?

So Robin began his tissue of inventions. Owen felt his position as a poor man engaged to a rich girl. His funds were running short—that was the secret which had been harassing him for weeks and making him so unlike himself. He was too proud to confess the truth to Lavender. He had gone away to work—to re-establish his position—and he had begged Robin to explain matters to his *fiancée*.

"But the money is nothing to me!" Lavender cried. "It is Owen's by right, and would have been his but for dear mother's sudden and tragic death. Oh! won't he look at it like that—and come back to me?"

Robin was obliged to entrench himself behind the standpoint of Owen's invincible pride. He succeeded in comforting the girl for the time being, which was his main object that day. "She will learn the truth when Owen writes," he told himself. "She will be better able to bear it then."

But Owen never wrote. The days passed, and no letter came. Lavender began to fret once more.

And then—always to avert the evil day—to keep those dear eyes from shedding tears, Robin adopted desperate, foolish means. He himself wrote letters, and signed them with Owen's name. There was no difficulty about the handwriting. The lovers had never corresponded, Owen having been at Selwood from the beginning of the engagement to the day of his flight.

It was quite easy to send the letters to a friend in Paris and have them posted from there. In these communications Owen professed to be very busy settling his affairs and making arrangements for the future; he was building himself up a position; as soon

as this was established he would return and claim Lavender as his wife; he would no longer feel then that he was taking undue advantage of his *fiancée's* wealth.

And all the while Robin knew how hopeless it was, how futile. There were days when an avowal trembled upon his lips; then he would purse them tightly together. "Another time, another time," he would mutter to himself. "I shall find a way out. Lavender mustn't be made to cry."

And so it went on. Robin spoke to no one of Owen's marriage, not even to Lord Martyn, whom he saw frequently in those days. But he made an effort to trace his friend, fearing for his future, and guessing that Zélie would have none of him; but though he did his utmost, both in London and Paris, his search was fruitless. He returned to Selwood, drawn there by the magnetism of Lavender, and the tragic farce was continued as before.

For Robin suffered acutely. He and Lavender were thrown much together, and she was far too natural and healthy-minded to conceal from him that she was glad of his company, that she had a strong liking for him, as Owen's friend, and that the sympathy which had sprung up between them was agreeable to her.

Once she ventured to question him as to why he had never married, and in a burst of confidence Robin told her all about his never-forgotten love affair; how the girl to whom he had given his heart had been stricken down by consumption, how he had married her when she had but a few weeks of life to look forward to, how their honeymoon—a brief honeymoon, spent in the forest of Fontainebleau—had terminated, as they both knew it must, in the bride being laid to rest in a quiet little cemetery, hedged in by giant

trees, where the grass was always green, and where wild flowers, which she loved so dearly, grew in profusion.

That Lavender was the living image of his dead love, this fact Robin kept to himself, as closely as he kept the secret of the adoration he bore her. For Lavender was not for him, so he told himself over and over again, with his blundering lack of self-confidence; how could she care for him when she had given her heart to Owen? Owen, so handsome and clever; Owen, who had proved so false?

And so Robin's days were bitter-sweet; yet he prayed night and morning that they might endure a little longer, and he could see no other way to secure this but by keeping up the deception which he had already practised successfully for so many weeks. For when Lavender knew the truth, as she must at last, she would be angry; she would never forgive him; she would not understand; and then he must go, there would be nothing for it but that; but, oh! might God grant that that day should not come soon!

The letters which he wrote to Lavender in Owen's name came to have a weird fascination for him. Very soon after he had begun writing them the girl complained to him that Owen expressed himself coldly, that his letters were not lover-like. She did not complain a second time. Robin put into his effusions all the passion of his own heart, all the longing desire he bore. Owen was almost forgotten as the burning words flowed from a ready pen. Once he had actually signed his own name, but discovered the mistake in time.

Of course, he received Lavender's replies. He treasured them as holy things. At first he did not intend to read them, but there were questions to be answered;

it was necessary to show a knowledge of what she had written. The pain of it, at first, was almost more than he could bear, but by degrees, in some extraordinary fashion, he began to forget Owen and associate himself with the letters, so that he looked for their coming with the keenest desire.

Robin pondered upon these matters as he made his way to the Manor. For how long could he keep up the deception? How would it all end? He knew that he had been a fool, and yet it was love—the deepest, tenderest love, which had inspired folly.

Lavender and Mrs. Foxhall, her chaperon, were in the garden sunning themselves upon the lawn. The elder lady had the day's paper spread out before her, and she had evidently been reading from it aloud. Robin noticed at once that there was a look of concern upon the girl's face.

"Isn't this a terrible thing, Mr. Clithero?" she said, after the formal words of greeting had been spoken. "Mrs. Foxhall has been reading me all the particulars. I could hardly believe it true."

"I'm afraid I haven't looked at the morning paper," Robin admitted, "so I don't know what has happened. I had some work I wished to finish in a hurry. Will you tell me all about it?"

"It's about the murder of that poor Mr. Aldis at Chamney," explained Lavender. "You know that the trial of the Frenchman, whom everybody believed guilty, was nearing its end."

"The verdict was not expected till Monday," put in Robin.

"No. But the case came to an unexpected conclusion. The prisoner has been put back pending fresh inquiries. It appears that last night, just before the closing of the court, a woman stood up and accused

herself of the murder. She cried out that she could bear it no longer, that she must not let the innocent suffer for her crime. She was overwrought and hysterical, I'm sure, for it isn't possible—I can't believe it's possible."

"A woman?" Robin looked his surprise, and wondered.

"Yes. Cecily Cuthbert, the actress, you know. She cried out that it was jealousy which made her do the deed; that she loved the man she killed, and that she had not known a moment's rest since she struck the blow. Remorse had tortured her. There was a terrible scene in court, it appears, for she screamed, and denounced another woman, the dancer—Zélie is the name she goes by, I think—the French girl who was at Chamney the night of the murder, and whose dancing made me shudder—as the real cause of the tragedy, the murderess—though her hands were not stained with blood. Oh! isn't it terrible? I remember Miss Cuthbert quite well. I thought her so pretty and graceful—not at all the sort of woman that one can associate with a crime."

"No." Robin set his teeth. "If it had been the other woman, Zélie, there would have been no cause for wonder. Guilty or no, Miss Cuthbert was right in denouncing that tiger cat as a murderess—she is one of those who lure men, body and soul, to destruction. There is venom on her lips, and she has no heart, no warm, human blood in her veins, no soul. She is what she showed herself as that night at Chamney —the eternal temptress, a creature fashioned from the mist of ages."

He spoke with unwonted vehemence, and Lavender gazed at him in some surprise; then her eyes grew troubled.

"Oh! is she as bad as that, Mr. Clithero?" Lavender clasped her hands nervously. "But—but Owen knows her, doesn't he? They talked together at Chamney that night. I didn't say anything about it, but I wasn't quite happy."

Robin laughed shortly, and a trifle awkwardly, realising that he was on dangerous ground. He found some excuse for Owen, and then brought the conversation back, as quickly as he could, to the subject of the trial and Cecily Cuthbert's confession.

Mrs. Foxhall was quite in her element in discussing this. She loved sensational cases. She adjusted her spectacles upon her nose, and read out paragraphs from the newspaper report. "I confess I am as surprised as everybody else must be," she declared. "I had quite made up my mind that this French creature —Bibi Coupe-vide—what a name to go by!—was guilty. And I think so still, and am sure that he'll be found guilty in the end." She spoke with finality, and as if her word was law. Then she rose and bustled off to the house, having duties to attend to.

Lavender accompanied Robin to the gates of the park. He had told her that he was going to London on business, and might be absent for a day or two.

"I had a letter from Owen this morning," she said with a smile—one of those smiles which repaid Robin for all that he had suffered by his deception, "and he says that he is getting on wonderfully, so it may not be so very long now before he returns to me. That foolish pride of his—when he need never have gone away at all! But, oh! I do admire him for it! I do, and I have no doubt about his love for me now—he writes so sweetly, so tenderly. And it was all for the best, after all, for we couldn't have been married this year, while he and I are still in mourning."

Robin reached London early in the afternoon, and made his way direct to the hospital where Owen was lying. Here he was expected, and the ward sister supplied him with particulars of the accident before conducting him to the bedside of the patient.

"I'm afraid there is no hope, Mr. Clithero. It is very doubtful if your friend lives through the night. Have you seen much of him lately?" The sister had keen grey eyes, and Robin felt that she was scrutinising him closely.

No hope! Robin shuddered, for the recollection of Lavender's happy words when he left her at Selwood Park gates flashed through his brain. "He says he is getting on wonderfully—it may not be long before he returns to me." And all the while Owen lay here, mangled and shattered, at death's door. How tragic it was, how infinitely tragic!

"No," Robin replied, "I have not seen Mr. Mayne for some months."

"It appears that he has been addicted to drugs. We have had information from the landlady of the house where he was living. Not only that—he has been drinking heavily. He went home last night in a maddened and irresponsible condition. Towards morning he was seized with violent delirium. The people of the house sought to restrain him, but he escaped from them and flung himself out of the window. He has received an injury to his spine—besides other hurts—from which he cannot recover. He regained consciousness in the hospital, and was able to give us your address—he said that he had no other friends. Only he kept repeating the name of Zélie, and I found out that he was thinking of the French girl who dances at the Star Theatre. So I sent a message to her—but she has not come."

"Does he know that you sent that message?" Robin put the question anxiously.

"Yes. And since then he has never taken his eyes from the door. But she will not come. I'm sure of that from the way she received the messenger—one of our porters. He says, Mr. Clithero, that her eyes lit up when she read the note, and that she laughed—she laughed!"

"Curse her!" muttered Robin under his breath. Then he asked if he might be taken to his dying friend.

He bit his lip to keep the tears back when he stood by the partially-screened bed in the long ward and gazed down upon the poor shattered thing that, not so many months ago, had been a man, a man of splendid physique and robust health, one whom men envied and women admired—his friend, Owen Mayne.

This was he whom Robin had set up on a pedestal and made a hero of. This was he whose good looks, whose easy manners and quick wit, had won so many hearts, who might have risen to proud heights because of the talent that was in him; above all, this was he upon whom Lavender had bestowed her love, he for whose return she was waiting, picturing him to herself the proud lover, the man that he ought to have been. And he lay here, his face contorted, discoloured, hideous, the hand of death upon him! Oh! the pity of it!

"Curse her!" repeated Robin, gulping down the lump that had risen in his throat. "It is she, Zélie, who has brought him to this."

It was true that Owen's eyes had been fixed upon the door. His bed was placed close to it. There was a faint glimmer in them as the sister appeared with a visitor, then the light had died out and the lids fell. Apparently he had not recognised his friend.

"He is going fast," whispered the sister.

Robin stooped over the bed. There were red marks, like scratches, upon Owen's forehead and cheek and lip.

"We don't know how he received those wounds," said the sister; "they did not happen in his fall. He had them when he went home last night. But they are superficial, and of no importance."

"They look as if they had been done with a claw," Robin said, with an involuntary shudder. "The wild beast has left her mark upon him," he added to himself, but without any idea in his mind of how nearly he spoke the truth.

An hour later Owen roused himself and stared wildly at Robin, who was still seated quietly by the bed.

"Has she come?" The words were breathed in a moan.

Robin bent forward and rested his hand on that of the dying man. "It is I, Robin," he said. "Don't you know me, Owen?"

There was faint recognition in the dull eyes, but the question was repeated mechanically:

"Has she come?"

Robin hesitated, then he lied splendidly—lied as it was his nature to lie, if by so doing he might spare pain.

"Yes—she came an hour ago—Zélie, your wife. You were unconscious, and did not waken. She kissed you on the brow and lips, Owen. She sat here by the bedside longing for you to recognise her. Then she had to go—her profession, you understand. But she promised to return—to-morrow."

Robin spoke the last word with a catch of his breath. For the words of the sister were in his mind as he

uttered them. She had said that her patient would not live through the night.

"Thank God for that!—but, oh! why didn't I feel that she was here? Still, thank God—and to-morrow—I shall see her to-morrow!"

Robin was repaid for his lie by the change that came over the sick man's face—a change that was almost startling. The haunting look of agony, the appalling restlessness of spirit, gave place to a calmer and more placid mien; the horrible contortion of feature vanished; the lips ceased to twitch convulsively; the eyes regained a feeble lustre.

Owen's thin fingers responded a little to the pressure of Robin's hand. "It was good of you to come, old friend," he murmured brokenly. "There was no one I wanted to see but Zélie and you."

"There is someone else who loves you." Robin bent low over the bed so that his whispered words should be heard.

"Lavender? Ah! poor Lavender! I was a brute to her. I have had the measure of my offending meted out to me. I deserve what I have got. She ought to hate me."

"Owen, she doesn't know. I tell you this, as it may make you happier. I never told her—I was afraid of breaking her heart. She still thinks you are true to her—that you will return. I deceived her—for her own sake."

There was a pause. Owen turned his head upon the pillow—his brain was slow to absorb Robin's words.

"Is this true?" he murmured faintly.

"It is God's truth! Lavender loves you—believes in you."

"Then she need never know. She will mourn for me

without knowing me for the scoundrel I am. Robin, how can I thank you?"

He lay quite still for a few minutes, but his lips moved, and Robin, bending over him, could distinguish a few words of what he muttered. It seemed as if his mind was wandering. His eyes were closed.

"The statue in the wood—the old legend—we looked upon it together when we plighted troth—when we first kissed. It was an evil omen—she said so. And it has come about—like the story. The lover was false—but she never knew—she never knew! Killed in a duel—God! haven't I been fighting a duel—with myself? She gazed upon his dead body—let Lavender gaze upon mine! But she never knew!"

Presently Owen re-opened his eyes and spoke more normally. "You've been good to me, Robin, and I hope you may be repaid as you deserve. Teach Lavender to love you—win her for yourself. She will turn to you in time, when she has ceased to mourn for one who was not worthy of her tears. But keep the truth from her to the end—if you can."

"Shall I send for her, Owen?"

The dying man shook his head weakly. "Not till I am dead. Would you have her hear the name of Zélie upon my lips, meet Zélie herself, perhaps? No" —a smile parted his lips—"let me die happy in the knowledge that my wife cares for me—that she came when I called her—that she will be here to-morrow—for I'll live through the night, that my eyes may feast upon her face once more—that she will be here to kiss me again before I go to the unknown. Ah! the kiss of Zélie—the kiss of Zélie!"

"God! may he die before dawn!" Robin breathed the prayer from the depth of his heart, breathed it for his dying friend's sake.

And it was in the silent watches of the night that the end came. Owen was unconscious for hours before he breathed his last. Robin hardly stirred from the bedside.

There was no suffering. Owen seemed lost in a happy dream. There was a smile upon his lips as he babbled of bygone days, days when the world had smiled upon him, when the future was bright with promise.

And then it seemed as if Zélie came to him, as if she were stooping over him. Owen lifted his feeble arms and in imagination he seemed to be clasping her to his breast—no doubt her lips were pressed to his —and death bestowed upon him that which life had denied—the kiss of Zélie.

He died with that name upon his lips.

"It is the end," said the sister. "The end is peace."

Robin bowed his head, and tears brimmed in his eyes. "She has done her worst," he muttered. "The vampire woman has claimed her prey."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THERE was an inquest, of course, but it revealed nothing of the inner tragedy of Owen Mayne's life. A comparatively unknown young artist had given way to the temptation of drink and drugs, and had thrown himself out of a window in an access of frenzy—that was all that the world need know.

That he was scarred by the panther's claw, that it was his wild, insatiable passion for Zélie which had led to his death—that she was actually his wife—besides Zélie herself, who naturally maintained silence, Robin was the only living being acquainted with the actual facts. And dearly as he would have loved to hold this "snake woman" up to public ignominy, he held his tongue—for Lavender's sake.

Had he been able, he would have spared her the knowledge of Owen's fall into evil habits as well—the degrading circumstances of his death. He would have played his drama of kindly deception to the end. But the publicity of the inquest prevented this. Lavender was bound to learn that the man she loved, and whom she believed to have been working to gain an honourable position for her sake, had given himself up to the craving for insidious poisons.

But beyond this her knowledge did not extend. Robin saw to it that Lavender should not suspect her dead lover of further deception. For this purpose he actually travelled to Paris, telling Lavender that the journey was necessary for the settling of Owen's affairs. He returned with a glowing account of the work—wholly imaginary—which Owen was supposed

to have accomplished, and he expended all his ready money in hunting up and purchasing some of the signed sketches and pictures which his late friend had disposed of, and these he brought back to Lavender in proof of his assertion.

The girl never doubted the genuineness of the letters she had received. By a fortuitous circumstance, Owen had only just moved into the rooms where he met with his death, and no reference was made at the inquest as to where he had lived prior to this. Also Robin in his letters had always represented Owen as journeying frequently to and fro between Paris and London.

Lavender was prostrated with grief, and for some days after the funeral, a quiet funeral, at which there were no other mourners than herself and Robin, she was in danger of falling seriously ill. For as long as he lived Robin would never forget the scene when the girl, summoned to London by telegram, stood at the bedside of the dead man and gazed dry-eyed upon the face that had regained its beauty in death. He had heard the legend of the statue in the wood, and had understood Owen's allusion to it.

"She never knew that her lover was false." The words impressed themselves upon his brain as he marked the horror and despair, the sense of irremediable loss, which the girl's eyes expressed.

"How she loved him!" Robin felt then, more than ever before, the hopelessness of his own love. And there would be no more letters to write—never again could he pour out his soul in those passionate effusions which had become so strangely dear to him.

A week after the funeral Mrs. Foxhall took Lavender back to Selwood. It was then that Robin went to Paris, where he stayed some eight days. Upon

the day of his return to London—he had travelled by night—he met Lord Martyn in Piccadilly.

They lunched together at a club. Robin marvelled at the change which had come over his companion. Martyn had the appearance of a man who had suffered some deep and abiding sorrow. He had lost his easy cynicism, his nonchalant *laissez-aller* of manner. He sat with his broad shoulders hunched, and his cheeks were sallow—as if his splendid health had given way. He ate but sparingly.

He questioned Robin about Owen's death. "I have my suspicions that he, too, may have been a victim of that worker of evil, Zélie. She first came to England looking for him. I saw them together at Selwood. Am I right, Clithero?"

Robin admitted the fact without revealing the secret of the actual relationship. "She killed him," he said between his clenched teeth. "But Miss Percivale doesn't know this—I trust she never may."

"Another victim of the panther!" Martyn rested his head wearily upon his hand. "Another death to my score—for I feel myself responsible for all this, Clithero. It was I who set the wild beast free, to tear and rend and devour. Where will it end—God! where will it end?"

His burden was heavy upon him. Robin, who did not know the full intensity of that burden, could find no words of comfort.

"Do you know what she has done?" Martyn leant forward over the table, speaking with the utmost intensity. He had endured his sorrow in silence so long—it was a relief to pour out his soul to sympathetic ears. "There is one being in the world I love—my god-daughter, Lady Beatrice Clewer. You know her. She was engaged to a man whom she loves, and who

loves her—Donald Ransom. I'll swear that he loves her still, in spite of all. But Zélie has infatuated him —has made him false to his vows. He has broken the engagement definitely, alleging some feeble excuse —a silly letter or so which Beatrice penned to another man when she was little more than a child—just a schoolgirl freak. The letters were brought to him by a blackmailer—instigated, I'll swear, by Zélie herself. And now—I've only heard it to-day—Donald has declared his intention of making Zélie his wife! Think of it! My God! It will break Beatrice's heart!"

Lord Martyn broke off, and there was a hoarse sound in his throat that was like a groan. He was suffering—suffering acutely—his brain on the rack.

"And I can do nothing—nothing," he resumed. "That's the hell into which I have been thrust—my punishment. I, who set the panther free, must stand by and watch while the living, bleeding hearts are torn from the breasts of those I care for. Stephen Aldis—he was my friend—Mayne, too—and there is poor Cecily Cuthbert languishing in prison, a self-avowed murderess. They say that her mind is giving way. Beatrice—this trouble will kill her, I tell you—and Donald—he is not to blame because he has fallen prey to an enchantress—but she will throw him over when she has tired of him, or if she holds him to her —if she really loves, as she pretends, it will be worse for him, far worse. His fate is sealed. But Zélie goes on triumphing, battening on the blood of her victims, and I—I am powerless!"

Lord Martyn gulped down a glass of brandy which he had ordered, and which had just been set before him. It was the mellowest "fine champagne"—a brandy that was the boast of the club—and at ordinary times Martyn would have sipped it delicately, enjoy-

ing its bouquet and rare savour with the palate of a connoisseur, but now it was not the taste of it that he required—it was because his nerves were unstrung, and all on edge, that he committed what he himself a short while ago would have been the first to condemn as little less than a crime.

He found a sympathetic listener in Robin—Robin who hated Zélie as much as it was in his power to hate any living being. And Martyn grew calmer after a few moments, something of his old mastery, his disdain of difficulties, returning to him. Had he not fought his way through life when there were overwhelming odds against him, so should he acknowledge himself beaten now—beaten by a woman?

"Thank heaven, the season is at an end, and Zélie is going away to America. Let them keep her there. The British public is fickle, and there will be a new favourite by the winter. I'll see to that myself. I'll crush this monster I let loose—I'll crush her yet!"

He struck the table with his clenched fists—large, powerful fists—so that the glass rattled. "I'll drive her back to the gutter!" he declared.

Robin, having been away in Paris, was not acquainted with all that had happened during his absence. He had been too busy to study the English newspapers. So it was now, from Lord Martyn's lips, that he learned the final result of the trial of Bibi Coupe-vide. Bibi had been found not guilty, and discharged. It was shown without a doubt that the knife with which Aldis had been killed was the property of Cecily Cuthbert. The story she told against herself was further corroborated by the discovery of blood-stains upon the gown she had worn that fatal night, and by her wild demeanour when she was seen rushing back to the house and locking herself in her room

at a time which tallied exactly with that which the police and the doctors had set down—allowing for her flight from the summer-house after the committal of the crime.

And she persisted in the truth of her self-condemnation. "I was mad with jealousy," she declared. "I loved Stephen Aldis, and believed that he loved me, too. He was always good to me. Then came that witch—Zélie—and won him from me. There were passionate scenes, and Stephen cast me off. I goaded him to fury—I know it. Then some evil spirit awoke within me, and I vowed that no other woman should know the kisses of his lips. The sight of Zélie drove me mad, for I hated her—oh! how I hated her! That night—in the arbour—I thought I had won Stephen back—but I hadn't—he had been drinking, and he insulted me—he didn't know what he said. I ran away, sobbing, but I lurked close by. And then came Zélie—I saw them together. I saw him take her in his arms—I saw him stoop to kiss her—my blood was on fire. She tore herself away—I think she laughed—and he stood there at the door of the arbour alone. I pressed my hands to my breast, and I felt the handle of the knife—I don't know why it was there, but I think I had some idea of killing myself if Stephen was cruel to me that night. And then a mist came before my eyes, and something within me said, 'Strike! strike!' I couldn't resist it—I struck—the blow fell before he even realised that I was there—and it was just as if the dagger sunk into my own heart. Then I heard footsteps, and I fled back madly to the house."

Zélie herself was called, and corroborated this statement, so far as her own presence in the summer-house was concerned. She had wandered into the garden with a friend—the now deceased Owen Mayne—and

had sent him back to the castle for a wrap. While waiting for him she had accidentally found her way to the arbour and had been surprised there by Stephen Aldis, who had attempted to kiss her. He had been drinking, and she was afraid of him. She had contrived to free herself from him and had run away. She knew nothing of what happened after that. It was not true that she had ever wilfully sought to win the actor's affection; she had merely regarded him as a friend; in fact, their acquaintance had been of very short duration.

Upon this evidence there was nothing for it but to acquit Bibi, and acquitted he accordingly was. Cecily Cuthbert was put back to stand her trial for the murder of Stephen Aldis, but it was now reported that she had broken down and showed signs of an unhinged mind.

And to Zélie it had meant nothing but advertisement. She had committed no act for which the public could condemn her. On the contrary, they flocked to see her, and the Star Theatre was reaping a harvest such as it had never known.

"Radcliffe chuckles whenever we meet," said Martyn between his clenched teeth, "and blesses me by all his gods. And do you know what he has done now? He has engaged Bibi to dance with Zélie for the last week of the season. They start to-night. I understand the demand for seats has been enormous, past all precedent. It is hateful, hideous beyond words; but Radcliffe knows his business, which means that he knows the world."

A little later, as the two men sat in the smoking-room, with coffee and cigars, a telegram was brought to Lord Martyn. His cheeks, sallow already, paled as he read the missive.

"It is from Lady Beatrice," he said. "She begs me to come to her at once. I—I'm afraid there's something wrong, Clithero."

He pushed back his chair, and rose. His fingers kept closing and unclosing upon the pink paper. He forced a smile. "Of course it must be all right," he muttered; "why, she's sent the telegram herself. Forgive me, Clithero, I'm nervous to-day—out of sorts. But you'll excuse me if I leave you? I'm glad we met and have had a talk."

They passed out into the street together. Here Martyn hailed a taxi-cab, gave a hurried direction to the driver, shook Robin's hand, and was gone.

Robin had business of his own to attend to, business which occupied him the best part of the afternoon. It was eight o'clock before he returned to the rooms in the neighbourhood of Russell Square, where he always stayed when in town.

He had been making his preparations for leaving England once and for ever. He was quite sure that it was wisest for him to do so. To live on at Selwood was an impossibility—he would have no rest, no ease of mind, while seeing Lavender day after day. Life would be one long torture for him. He had performed his duty—and now he must do his utmost to forget. Let him go back to the memory of his dead love—the love of that sweet ghost who had been his constant companion till he met Lavender—when she had left him, as it seemed to Robin, with a faint kiss upon his brow, as though she were content. And yet that was a mistake—for there could be no warm, living love for Robin. Yes, he must go away.

He ordered some dinner—anything that was going—it didn't matter. The dinner was brought to him, together with a letter. The letter was from Lavender,

and as Robin read it he breathed hard, and deep colour mantled his cheeks. He pushed his food away almost untouched.

Lavender wanted him. That was the purport of her letter. She had heard from his landlady at the cottage that he meditated leaving Selwood altogether. Why should he do so? Why should he want to take himself out of her life—she was so alone and friendless? She begged him in pretty phrases, which evidently came straight from her sad heart, to reconsider his decision.

And after this there could be no hesitation on Robin's part. Lavender wanted him—that was enough. "Go to her!" he cried fervently. "Of course I'll go to her—I won't wait. I'll go back to Selwood tomorrow."

His cheeks burned, the blood seemed on fire in his veins. He clasped his hands in the attitude of prayer. "Oh! my love!" he cried, "if you could but love me, too—not of the fullness of your heart—I don't ask for that which you could never bestow again—but of your sympathy and kindness—because I, like yourself, have loved and lost!"

Then, as he spoke the words aloud, it seemed to him as if that gentle spirit, whose face was like the face of Lavender, came back once more, bent over him, and whispered in his ear—whispered of hope and courage and love. "Be of good heart—go to her—she wants you."

And so Robin set himself to write a letter to Lavender in which he told her that he would return to Selwood no later than the next day, and his pen seemed to glide over the paper, words formed themselves, and he found an eloquence of phrasing of which he could hardly have believed himself capable.

This was the first letter that he had ever written in his own name to Lavender. How glad he was that he had taken the precaution to disguise his handwriting when he penned those missives which professed to come from Owen!

He took the letter to the post himself, and when he returned it was to find a visitor awaiting him. Lord Martyn, his face pallid and white as the dead, rose from a chair as Robin entered his sitting-room, and tottered rather than walked towards him.

"She's dead, Clithero!" Martyn gasped. "My sweet, innocent child, my Beatrice! She has fallen victim, too! Dead—dead—dead!" The words came in a despairing wail.

"My God, man! Is it true?" Robin's own happiness was thrust aside. He was all sympathy for the sorrow of his friend.

"True? Yes, it's true. She took poison after sending that telegram to me. She had been in a morbid, melancholic condition for days. I was afraid for her, but her stepmother didn't seem to realise the danger. Plenty of marriages get broken off, she said, and girls don't die of broken hearts nowadays. But they do, they may kill themselves. Clithero, she died at once—she was dead before I reached the house."

The strong man sank down into a chair and hid his face in his hands. His agony was appalling to witness. Sobs shook his heavy frame. The claws of the panther were at his heart.

At last he lifted his head. "You wonder to see me suffering like this?" he muttered. "Clithero, I'll tell you the truth—a secret that has never been breathed to living soul. Beatrice was my daughter—my own child!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

BIBI COUPE-VIDE, attired in the conventional Apache costume, ready to go on the stage, confronted Zélie with sombre, menacing eyes. He had forced his presence upon her as she herself completed her theatre toilette.

"Is this true what I have been told of you, Zélie, *ma gosse?*" he inquired. "I want to know."

"What?" She turned with an impatient gesture. She was busy painting her lips.

"That you are going to marry an Englishman—this Sir Donald Ransom, whom I have seen you with? He brought you to the theatre to-night. He kissed you at the stage door. I saw it—yes, with my own eyes I saw it."

Zélie shrugged her shoulders. She did not wish to be bothered. It was not by her desire that Bibi was dancing at the Star Theatre that night. Indeed, after his acquittal, she had done her utmost to induce him to leave the country. She had, as usual, been generous with promises which she had no intention of keeping. She had given him money—almost lavishly—as an inducement, and as a sort of indication of what she would do in that indefinite future when she and her *petit homme*—the endearing term which still came easily to her lips—should be reunited.

Bibi had taken the gold, and seemed disposed to fall in with her proposals. He was sick of England—a dirty country, where innocent men, like himself,

could be thrown into prison, and even be threatened with their lives. Then he had had trouble with Alphonse Lereux, who, it appeared, had made free with the remaining two incriminating letters which Bibi had looked to for putting himself in funds. Lereux had taken the high hand, threatening certain revelations concerning a violent assault upon a night porter at the Northumberland Hotel, revelations which might send Bibi back to the prison from which he had come —and Bibi had had quite enough of that prison.

So Bibi would have returned quietly to Paris had not Mr. Radcliffe appeared upon the scene with the offer of a brief engagement at the Star Theatre at a salary which was quite sufficient to ensure an immediate acceptance. Zélie had objected, but her greedy soul yielded to the inducement of a proportionate increase to her own salary. It really didn't matter very much that Bibi should remain in London for another week.

Nevertheless, in her heart of hearts Zélie wished that Bibi had been convicted and hanged. Then he would have been out of her way once and for all, cleared from her path as Owen Mayne already was.

It was quite true that she had promised to marry Sir Donald Ransom. She was free to do so now. He was infatuated with her, and for her sake had thrown honour to the winds. But this had not been without a struggle on Zélie's part. For the first time in her life she really loved—the handsome young explorer had touched her heart as no other man had ever been able to touch it. She had made up her mind to win him for herself alone, and had deliberately set about doing so. She was utterly callous as to the pain she might inflict upon Lady Beatrice; what did Lady Beatrice—or any woman—matter to her? The only

impelling factor in Zélie's breast was the primitive instinct of fighting for what she herself desired. And Sir Donald, a strong man among men, had been wax in the hands of the enchantress, woman.

And now Bibi was manifesting an inclination to make himself a nuisance. It was that jealousy of his —that peculiar description of jealousy which is typical of his kind. Your Apache does not mind "affairs" —intrigues—in which his womankind are concerned, for they are likely to be remunerative to himself, but there must be no talk of love, the "affair" must not be one of the heart. Therein lies the distinction, the one point that counts.

Zélie had vowed to Bibi that love had played no part, should play no part in her schemes, and he had believed her. To whatever height she may have raised herself she was still *la gosse à Bibi!* Or so he had believed until that day, when some French *employé* at the theatre had told him of the rumour that the dancing girl was going to marry the handsome Englishman who occupied a stage-box every night that she performed, and with whom—one could tell it from the way she looked at him—she was madly in love. Bibi had watched for himself after that, and he had seen enough to make his heart beat wrathfully within him.

Hence he had confronted her with a direct accusation. And now Zélie only shrugged her shoulders and regarded him scornfully. There was a smile of disdain upon her painted lips.

She was not going to take the trouble to lie to him any more. She was filled that night with a sense of delirious elation, of realised power. For Donald had yielded to all that she desired; he had inserted a notice in the papers that his engagement to Lady Beatrice

Clewer was definitely at an end. And she, on her side, was ready to repay him—at last—for the sacrifices he had made on her behalf. She had whispered her promise in his ear that evening when he left her at the stage-door—a promise ratified by a kiss, that kiss of which Bibi Coupe-vide had been witness.

Why should she worry her head about such scum as Bibi at such a time? Let him have the truth, since he forced her to speak. She was proud of the avowal.

"Answer me," he said roughly, taking a step forward.

Zélie drew herself up, and Bibi was constrained to realise that this was not the same Zélie whom, at one time, he had been able to bully after the manner of his class—who expected nothing better. He was thick-skinned, had all the brutality of his ignorance, but her scorn lashed him till he writhed.

"I'll answer you fast enough," she retorted. "Don't think that I'm afraid. You dare not strike me now as you did in the past. I'd have you taken by your shoulders and thrown out into the street. I have but to ring the bell"—she stretched out her hand and touched it—"and they would come at once."

Bibi's eyes contracted to mere slits, but he made no further threatening gesture. "Go on!" he growled.

"You ask me if I am going to marry this Englishman," Zélie resumed, "and I answer 'Yes.' Why am I going to marry him? Because I love him." She rested her hands on her hips, and her black eyes sparkled and glowed. "Do I speak clearly? Do you understand me? It's because I love him. I shall give myself to him—for love. And the blood is dancing in my veins—my senses are on fire—because I am longing for his kisses on my lips. You saw him kiss them—but he shall kiss again when you do not see—soon—

very soon—not the kiss that a man gives a woman in the street—at the stage door, as you saw it—ah! no. There, have I said enough?"

She was speaking to wound, to sting. She had forgotten her discretion—the need for it with such a man as Bibi Coupe-vide. Love was new to her—real love—and to her savage, untamed nature it seemed right to proclaim her love, to make no secret of it. Besides, Bibi had goaded her to the avowal by the very absurdity of his claims upon her—Bibi Coupe-vide and Sir Donald Ransom, could they be mentioned together in the same breath?

Bibi recoiled, and his head seemed to sink between his shoulders. "You mean that? It's true?"

"Why should I say it if it were not true?"

"Then you lied to me when you spoke of our being united again in Paris—one day?"

"Yes, I lied to you." Zélie spoke with insolent carelessness. "After this week, when your engagement ends, I hope I may never look upon your ugly face again. I loathe the sight of it! I hate you!"

Bibzi crouched, and for a moment he appeared like a wild beast about to spring. Zélie's hand went to the bell. There was a look in Bibi's eyes which, despite her arrogant elation of spirit, sent a cold shudder down her spine. She wished that she had been more discreet; this man, like all his sex, might have been quite easily managed if she had gone the right way about it.

Her dresser appeared almost immediately. Bibi pulled himself together, standing in his usual slouching attitude. The scowl upon his face appeared natural to him.

"You must go now, *mon ami,*" said Zélie in a suave tone of voice. "I must finish my toilette. We meet again upon the stage."

"Yes, we meet again," mumbled the man. He regarded her for a moment from under his dark brows, then without another word he shuffled from the room.

In the meanwhile, Robin Clithero and Lord Martyn were making their way to the Star Theatre. Zélie did not appear till about half-past ten o'clock, and it yet wanted a quarter of an hour to that time. Martyn had declared his intention of standing up and publicly denouncing the dancer, and nothing that Robin could say would make him swerve from this decision. So Robin had quickly decided to stand by his friend and support him through the inevitable scene that must ensue.

It was madness—sheer madness, of course—but Robin understood the state of mind into which Martyn had been thrown. The secret, so long kept, had been revealed to him. Lady Beatrice Clewer, lying dead by her own hand, was Martyn's child, his daughter.

The story was a romance, and it was told in broken tones, so that Robin had to exercise his intellect to put two and two together. He gathered, however, that Beatrice's mother was not in reality the wife of the Earl of Albyn—as Beatrice and the earl himself had always supposed—nor had the earl ever had a living child of his own.

Beatrice was the daughter of Lord Martyn and of a beautiful French girl, whose station in life was so high that any alliance between her and the young Englishman, who had not then succeeded to the title, nor had any expectation of doing so, was utterly out of the question. Fondly as they loved each other, they might not marry. Here was the beginning of Martyn's grudge against society—against mankind at large.

They loved in secret. Finally they agreed to elope together, disastrous as the consequences might be.

There was a reason which made this course necessary. Unfortunately, Martyn was taken ill, and lay for many weeks at the point of death. His recovery was despaired of.

While he lay helpless thus Beatrice made her appearance in the world—a child of sorrow, all the more so since her birth cost her mother's life. The tragedy had to be hushed up, and the question arose what was to be done with the waif of humanity that might threaten the good name of a distinguished family. The mother was dead, the father not expected to recover.

It happened that Lady Albyn had just given birth to a still-born daughter. The earl was away from home at the time. His passionate desire for a child was well known to the family to which Beatrice's mother belonged. They approached the countess with a scheme of substitution, a scheme that was eagerly accepted. There were but few who knew the facts, and they were bound to secrecy.

Martyn himself would never have known of what had been done had not a hot-headed brother of the dead girl revealed the truth to the Englishman upon his recovery from his illness. A duel was the consequence—a duel in which Martyn shot in the air, and himself received a wound which sent him back to his sick-bed for a further long period. Only his strength of constitution pulled him through—for himself, he had no wish to live. He had grown to hate the world and his fellow-men.

It was worse for him later on, when his health was restored to him. He could not claim his child as his own. For her own sake it was impossible. Why should she be branded all her life as a love-child? Furthermore, the Earl of Albyn was Martyn's dearest friend at that time, and his joy and happiness over his sup-

posed daughter were such that Martyn—whose grudge was always against the race of mankind, not the individual—could not find it in his heart to undeceive him.

And so Lord Martyn accepted the ruling of fate, and became god-father—no more—to his own child. How often he had been tempted to open his arms to her and avow the truth, none but himself knew. His iron will and his interest in the girl's future had alone kept him silent. For, as it was, she had a splendid position and an honoured name; what could he offer her in return but disgrace?

Such was Lord Martyn's story as it was revealed to Robin—revealed under the stress of circumstances—a secret that would remain a secret to the end, as far, at least, as Robin's fidelity was concerned.

"I saw it once in a vision," groaned the unhappy man, "that the blow I must take against society would redound upon myself. Yet I went on—I set the panther free. And now the claws of the wild beast, wet as they are with my child's blood, are rending at my heart. But Zélie shall not exult"—he raised his clasped hands above his head—"I have spared her too long—spared her because she is not a creature of to-day, and because I have said 'She does not know'; but now—my child's blood calls for vengeance—God—let me strike—and die!"

And so it was that, in spite of Robin's efforts to dissuade him, Martyn avowed his resolution of going to the theatre. And Robin, whose heart bled for his friend's desperation and despair, felt bound to accompany him.

"I'm sorry, my lord," said the man at the box office, "but there isn't a seat to be had in the house."

This was a matter of small importance to Martyn,

who had free entry to any part of the theatre. "Never mind," he replied. Then he asked quickly, "Is Sir Donald Ransom here?"

The clerk had no need to consult his lists. "You will find him in the stage-box, my lord," he replied. "But I'm afraid Mlle. Zélie is half through her dancing," he added. "She came on a little earlier than usual to-night. However, the *Danse du Néant* is still to come."

"We will find Sir Donald," said Martyn quickly. "The stage-box." There was a curiously strained inflection in his voice as he spoke the words. "Nothing could be better."

"Donald does not know—yet," he whispered in Robin's ear as they moved away together.

An attendant escorted them to the door of the box and tapped softly. A profound silence reigned throughout the theatre—Zélie was dancing.

After a moment the door was opened by Donald himself—Robin could hear his muttered ejaculation of impatience at the disturbance. The vast auditorium was practically in complete darkness, and it was only by the light from the corridor without that the occupant of the box recognised his visitor.

"Martyn—Harry—you!"

There had, of course, been strained relationship between the two. Lord Martyn had expostulated with Sir Donald upon his behaviour, at first gently, but later with heat. And the latter, conscious of being altogether in the wrong, despising himself at heart for his folly and cruelty, had borne reproaches ill—he had found his only refuge in roughness and brutality. He had spoken harshly of Lady Beatrice—what sort of wife would a girl make who was capable of penning love letters to a popular actor? And all the while he

had known himself mean and cowardly—his soul as well as his body was in the siren's grip.

The attendant closed the door after Martyn, followed by Robin, had entered. There at the back of the box the darkness seemed almost profound. The orchestra was making soft, lilting music. Robin recognised the melody. He knew that Zélie had almost reached the end of that part of her performance which preceded the *Danse du Néant.* She was portraying the Eternal Temptress in the character of some Court beauty of the eighteenth century. He had only to advance to the front and glance to his left, where a ruddy glow indicated the stage, to see the dancer herself, to be so near to her that a spring and a few steps might place him by her side. It was the stage-box.

Martyn and Sir Donald were standing confronting each other. The younger man was breathing heavily, wrathfully. The elder had gained a remarkable composure. His brain-storm seemed to have passed away now that he was about to carry out an indomitable purpose.

"Donald, she is dead," he said quietly. "You have killed her. Are you satisfied?"

"She? Who? In Heaven's name, what do you mean?" Sir Donald fell back, the hands which he had raised in angry protest dropping to his sides.

"You know what I mean—to whom I refer. Beatrice is dead. You have slain a pure, sweet girl, crushed the life out of a loving heart—for the sake of—that! Look, man! Look!"

Martyn's heavy hand dropped on the young man's shoulder, thrusting him forward to the front of the box. The stage was in full view now. They stood in the light.

"My God—dead! It's a lie—it can't be true!"

"Slain for that!" repeated Martyn, the weight of his hand growing heavier.

The lilt of the music had changed to a wail now. Zélie stood in the centre of the stage, slim and lithe, her form but lightly covered with gauzy, filmy drapery —for, save in the final dance, she still disdained elaborate accessories of costume and scenery to indicate the particular epoch or character that she represented —and in her hands, uplifted above her head, she held a cluster of red roses. Gradually the bare white arms were lowered until the flowers were on a level with her smiling, cruel mouth; then, as her lips touched them, the blossoms fell to pieces, scattering in a shower of scarlet petals to her feet. And it was as if every petal was a drop of blood.

The curtain fell amid a storm of applause, but the theatre remained in darkness. Donald Ransom had sunk into a chair, his face buried in his hands. The quivering of his shoulders betokened the agony he endured. Once Robin caught the sound of a low moan. Lord Martyn stood silently by his side. He had the appearance of one who is waiting for the fulfilment of destiny.

"Body and soul"—Robin was muttering the words to himself as he gazed at his two companions—"she destroys them body and soul." He was thinking of Harry Martyn as he had known him—strong of body and spirit, steadfast of purpose—a man whose nature it was to be unyielding to the end. "What I have done, I have done," was his motto. But Zélie had broken him—he had repented him of the blow which he had struck against society—repented because he himself had been sorely smitten. The fineness of the man's character had been undermined—Zélie had abased his spirit if she had had no dominion over his body. And

how would he behave now—now that personal grief had driven him to despair? Would his strength be restored to him for one brief moment—even as to Samson after the shearing of his locks?

And Donald Ransom, quivering there in a torment of self-reproach, freed for the time being from the spell of the enchantress—what of him? The world had honoured him, he had held his head high—and with cause—he had never forfeited his self-respect till Zélie had obsessed him. But now he was like a whipped child, his very manhood seemed to have fallen from him, he was an object of scorn.

"The vampire has absorbed his spirit as she has sucked his blood," Robin whispered to himself; "he will never lift his head again."

And with the rest, the other victims of the Snake-woman, had it not been the same? Body and soul—the worker of evil—she had destroyed them all.

"She is not fit to live!" Robin muttered. "Is there not one to slay the monster?"

The curtain rose again. A burst of applause, which sounded strange and weird in the darkened house, heralded the first appearance of Bibi Coupe-vide since his trial. The *Danse du Néant* had commenced.

Robin had seen the dance many a time, and loathed it. He abhorred the slow, voluptuous waltz tune, the suggestive pauses, the sensual abandonment of music and gesture. Zélie, in her close-fitting black dress, a rose between her lips and at the side of her head, her hair parted and drawn back tightly over her ears, seemed to him a more wicked and ill-omened figure than when she appeared with the glamour of the past to leaven the vice which every step of her dancing portrayed.

And the evil of it all was more obvious to him now

than ever before. Zélie and Bibi put a fierceness into their dancing which was terrifying in its intensity. There was not a member of the audience who did not hold his breath, spell-bound. When the man raised his fist it was as if every nerve in his body was a-tingle with the desire to strike indeed; one felt that he was dominated by but one idea—to crush, subdue, or kill—this piece of frail femininity that fell in voluptuous attitudes in his arms, only to withdraw, laughing, mocking, defiant.

And Zélie—her eyes shone as they had never shone before, her sharp white teeth flashed from behind straight red lips, and there were many who saw her dance that night who shuddered and turned away their heads as from the vision of something too intense for the understanding of merely human eyes.

For how were they to know that here was hate—most primitive of emotions—lust, wrath unbridled—all the evil passions that heart of man can conceive—not merely portrayed by capable actors, but actually existent? Zélie and Bibi were not acting—every gesture, every movement of that wild dance was true to one as to the other. To those who watched, it was art; but to the man and woman upon the stage it was stern reality.

Now and again the lips of the dancers moved, and it was evident that they spoke together, though none might know the words that passed between them. Only Zélie laughed and mocked, and her eyes were like sparkling emeralds as now and again she turned them in the direction of the box which she knew—and which Bibi knew—to be occupied by her lover. In the gloom of the auditorium she could not see what was passing there, nor who stood by his side, nor how he sat huddled together in his chair, an abject figure of distress.

And the more she mocked, the fiercer and more determined grew the face of her partner in the dance. Ugly and vile at the best of times, it was hideous now. Bibi Coupe-vide was animal as Zélie was animal, and the instincts of the beasts were running riot in their breasts. Once the man held the woman tightly to him, and his lips sought hers, while she stiffened her body in his embrace and thrust him from her with all her force; then, when her resistance was overpowered, she struck him upon the cheek, struck him with her clenched fist. And the vast audience held its breath at this astounding demonstration of art.

And so they swayed and swung, now in each other's arms, now apart, crouching as if preparing for a spring, for a fresh attack, and it was at one of these moments, when Zélie had been thrown to her knees close under her lover's box, that Robin noticed Lord Martyn raise his hand, and the light from the stage glinted for a moment upon the muzzle of a pistol.

"My God! Martyn! What are you about to do?"

Robin clasped his friend's arm, and the movement saved Zélie for the time being, for the next moment she had sprung back into Bibi's arms, and the pair were whirling round the stage in a frenzied waltz.

Martyn turned furiously upon Robin. "Damn you, Clithero! he muttered. "Why did you interfere with me? I would have shot her down then—shot her as I'd shoot a mad dog! That's the way I propose to make public protest. But there's time yet—they'll be apart again presently. I've only to wait."

A few minutes earlier Robin had asked himself if there was no one to slay the beast. But now—he had not thought of this! Yet, though he shuddered, he felt, in some vague, indescribable manner, that what Martyn was about to do, what he had come to the

theatre with the fixed intention of doing, was really no more than might have been expected of the man—so Samson, of the shorn head, had seized the pillar of the temple and overwhelmed his enemies. The world had no punishment to inflict upon Zélie, worker of evil, so he who gave her to the world must be the one to mete out the penalty she deserved.

But it was murder—murder! Robin stood in painful suspense and hesitation. What was he to do? He could not allow Martyn to carry out his fell intention. Should he give the alarm? Should he throw himself upon his friend and wrench the revolver from his hand? At any moment now the opportunity to shoot might present itself.

Martyn did not seem to anticipate any further opposition from Robin. He had taken up his position at the front of the box, and the hand that held the revolver rested lightly upon the velvet-covered ledge. He was prepared. Donald Ransom saw nothing, realised nothing of what was about to happen—he had lifted his head, and his bloodshot eyes were fixed upon the stage—upon Zélie.

"I must seize his arm again—prevent him shooting." So Robin muttered to himself. Then he, too, waited, watching.

Suddenly it seemed to him as if the couple upon the stage were no longer dancing, but actually struggling with each other. If it were indeed art, then it was the very acme of realism. But presently his suspicions were confirmed. Zélie gave vent to a loud cry:

"Let me loose—*gredin*—rogue—vagabond!"

Bibi did not let her loose. With one arm he grasped her the tighter. Something flashed in his right hand. Not a soul in that vast audience but held his breath, worked up to fever heat of excitement by the extraor-

dinary performance upon the stage. From high up in the gallery someone ventured to applaud, to whistle —an immediate cry of "hush!" followed this manifestation of feeling.

"He means it—my God—he means it!" The words escaped from Robin's lips, but they were drowned in a shriek from Zélie—such a shriek as surely had never before been heard upon the stage of the Star Theatre.

"He is killing me—help—murder!"

The knife was lifted, and fell so swiftly that few in the audience witnessed the blow. Only Zélie staggered forward, then once more the arms of the man encircled her, and his lips were pressed against her lips as she reeled against him. For a few moments he upheld her, then she slipped from his grasp and fell to her knees.

Applause broke forth from the greater part of the house, but there were some who hissed, and cried "It is too much!" while others stared at their friends and at the stage with blanched faces—wondering, doubting, fearing.

And very soon the ghastly truth became self-evident. Those in the front could see the life blood welling from Zélie's breast, staining her dress and the boards of the stage at her feet. At that moment Robin remembered the shower of rose petals, and shuddered.

Then, as Zélie collapsed, lying prone upon the ground, Bibi, still holding the fatal knife, bent over her and broke into a fit of sobbing, moaning as a wild animal may moan for its mate. He saw nothing of the great mass of people whom his act had thrown into wild confusion—almost panic—heard nothing of the frightened screams which went up from every side as women rushed for the doors, or fainted where they

sat; knew nothing save that Zélie was dead, and by his hand.

Donald Ransom sprang from the box to the stage. He rushed upon Bibi with clenched fists. He was followed by others. Then, swiftly, the curtain fell.

Lord Martyn had dropped his revolver to the floor. He threw up his arms despairingly, then sank into a chair.

Robin laid his hand upon his shoulder. "Thank God!" he cried fervently. "You have been spared a crime!"

Martyn broke into a wild laugh. "Spared a crime!" he exclaimed, and his tone was one of utter despair. "Is there no mercy in Heaven? I had asked but this —that my hand might slay. But now even that has been taken from me. My daughter's blood has cried to me for vengeance—in vain!"

Sobs convulsed his frame; but as for Zélie, the Snake-woman, the worker of evil—the curtain had fallen upon her—for the last time.

THE END

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